DEVELOPING A MODEL OF PARENT PARTICIPATION IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION CENTRE IN LAVENDER HILL, WESTERN CAPE

by

AILSA SALLY CONNELLY

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Principle Supervisor: Dr Naseema Shaik
Co-supervisor: Professor Agnes Chigona

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Declaration

I, **Ailsa Connelly, student number 217296963**, declare that the contents of this thesis represent my unassisted work, and that this thesis has yet to be submitted previously for academic examination towards any qualification. Furthermore, it expresses my opinions, not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Signed _____   Date ___17 October 2024_____

Abstract

Parental involvement in children's educational journeys has been established by global research. Despite this rhetoric, there is limited research in South African Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres that explores how parents should participate democratically in early education, especially in areas of low-socio-economic standing.

This interpretive, qualitative research was conducted in one ECCE centre, with parents and teachers, in Lavender Hill, Cape Town, South Africa, and endeavoured to understand how agency can be shifted for parents and teachers from involvement to active participation. The prospect of collaborating provides possibilities for meaningful participation. Opportunities were provided to give voice to all the participants in the setting. The ECCE centre staff (4) and 7 parents participated in the initial semi-structured interviews. A one-day Appreciative Inquiry (AI) included all the staff (4) and the whole parent body (27) providing the opportunity for democratic collaboration. Analysis of school documents and parent journaling, by 7 parents, added to the richness of the data collection. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed in the interpretation of the data.

The rich data collected considers how an ECCE centre can co-construct parent participation through collaboration. The opportunity for open dialogue provided the stakeholders in the setting the opportunity to listen to each other, supporting meaningful connection(s) and empowerment for parent participation within the community. The findings revealed the value of promoting parent agency through participation as it also supports the strengthening of community ties and social cohesion.

Creating opportunities for dialogue and participation helps develop a socially cohesive and transformative environment. Parents want to have an impact on the ECCE centre and are interested in the life of their children in the setting. Supporting meaningful participation and working together supports individuals and the community of the ECCE centre to become a community of practice that has the potential to impact the community around the setting.

The findings provided insight into what would be valuable to consider when co-constructing parent participation models that are unique to ECCE centres. Democratically including parents voice, contributes to the ongoing, iterative, unfolding of a parent participation model in the ECCE centre.

The co-construction of a bespoke parent participation model within the research setting informed the creation of a generic approach to parent participation that other educational settings can employ in the co-construction of their own approach to parent participation. The

generic model is based on the outcome of the findings with agentic and democratic practice as the foundation. This approach avoids an autocratic approach with the intention of empowering educational settings to co-construct their preferred way of collaborating to create social cohesion within their environment.

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I am forever grateful and thankful for the support and assistance of the following people and organisations who were instrumental in helping me complete this study:

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the families and teachers of Lavender Hill, who work tirelessly to improve their immediate community through relationships, laughter and conversations. I am forever indebted to being offered the opportunity to glimpse this space.

'I am not, I do not be, unless you are, unless you be.

Above all, I am not if I forbid you to be.' Freire

(2017)

'Umntu ngumntu ngabantu'

A person is a person through other people

(isiXhosa)

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	Appreciative Inquiry
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
DSD	Department of Social Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
MRQEECCE	Minimum Requirements for Qualifications for Early Childhood Educators
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NELDS	National Early Learning and Development Standards
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIDS-CRAM	The National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SGB	School Governing Body

Glossary of Key Terms

Appreciative Inquiry	A positive approach to creating change within a community or organisation by considering what already works well and how this can be used to support ongoing change.
Co-construction	Working together to become aware of shared understanding through interactions and learning from each other.
Collaboration	People working together to achieve a common goal to achieve a positive outcome and make improvements.
Community of Practice	People who share a common interest or concern work together to achieve a common goal with the intention of making improvements.
Connections	Being associated with someone or something else through shared ideas, experiences and learning.
Democracy	Sharing power equally amongst a group of people to support a community.
Early Childhood Care and Education	Programmes that support learning for children from the ages of 0-4 years, to support their holistic development.
Humanistic dialogue	Engaging with people to understand individual approaches and find common ground to build mutual understanding.
Participatory pedagogy	Based on educational principles that learning occurs through action to create meaning and connection.
Social cohesion	Uniting as a community to strengthen the social group and create a sense of connection amongst individuals.
Ubuntu	Humanity towards each other through sharing bonds and connections sharing responsibility as a collective with respect and helpfulness.

Chapter 1 Orientation to the Research Study

1.1.   Introduction

Successful Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes ensure that children have access to environments that help them realise their potential with the support of their caregivers (Hall et al., 2019:37). Parental involvement in ECCE has come under the spotlight in recent years as schools and ECCE centres both encourage and promote parents to be involved in some aspects of the life of the settings (Fenton et al., 2017; Meier & Lemmer, 2015; Venter et al., 2014; Cox-Petersen, 2011). It is important to contemplate the perceptions parents have of the value of their children attending ECCE centres as parental participation influences children's successes or failures in the centre and other social settings (Epstein, 1985:19). However, in South African ECCE centres, there is limited research that reveals the ways in which parents can and do participate, with more of an emphasis in parental involvement. Parent involvement is often viewed as sufficient as the schools and ECCE centres maintain control over what parents can be part of and how they can help (Biersteker, Berry & Gwele, 2023; Ebrahim, Bipath & Theron, 2023; Sang & Syomwene, 2018). Studies show that parents, teachers and children are active and equal partners in the construction of the curriculum and form part of the context as citizens with democratic rights who have a voice in its realisation (Pascal & Bertram, 2009;2012). Parental participation is thus not limited to financial contributions and should be strengthened by ECCE centres to enhance children's social and emotional wellbeing in support of their academic and overall success (Munje & Mncube, 2018:81). Acknowledging the importance of parental participation in the academic and social wellbeing of young children, this study will explore the nature of parental participation in ECCE settings in Lavender Hill, Cape Town. Using an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach (Cooperrider Whitney & Stavros, 2005), parents and teachers in the ECCE centre will co-construct a context specific model for parent participation.

1.2.   Background and motivation for the study

As a former Foundation Phase teacher, I instinctively felt the need to connect with the families of the children in my classroom. I did this by organising home visits to each family once a year. This gave me the chance to see the child in their own setting, to develop an understanding of the world from their point of view. These visits created the opportunity to break down potential barriers and build relationships with both the children and the parents/caregivers and helped me teach with the best interests of each child in my class in mind. My time in Montessori education further enhanced the notion that, as teachers, we are required to develop a relationship with the parents of the children we teach as well as gain insight into their lives at home. Montessori (1974) set up a preschool in the slums of Rome in

1907 and advocated for the parents to meet with the teacher "at least once a week" (1974:61) as well as requiring the teachers to be available to the parents as a "co-habitant with the families of all her little pupils" (1974:62).

The notion that teachers cultivate an understanding of the lives of the families within the school is considered by researchers (Epstein, 1985; Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012; Venter et al., 2014, Munje & Mncube 2018; Kambouri, 2021) to enhance the levels of education and emotional and social well-being of children. As a lecturer in teacher education, I continue to encourage students to consider the importance and value of developing a deeper understanding of the world through the eyes of the children they teach. This includes building a relationship with the parents and encouraging them to participate actively in the life of their child at school.

The National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) Wave 4 synthesis survey revealed that in 2020 COVID-19 resulted in the closure of many ECCE centres, with few children returning to ECCE centres when they were re-opened (Spaull et.al., 2021:9). In an informal meeting of ECCE principals and owners in Lavender Hill, questions arose about whether, or not, parents understood the value and importance of the centres and what steps could be taken to develop this understanding and encourage parents to send their children to ECCE centres. In Lavender Hill, ECCE centres are instrumental in supporting the children and the community around them. This is done by offering a safe place for children to be during the day, providing meals and preparing the children for formal schooling (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Giese et. al., 2022; Ashley-Cooper, 2021). Developing a model of parent participation can strengthen this support and encourage social cohesion through the democratic inclusion of all the stakeholders within the ECCE setting. This inclusion allows for the development of equal relationship building between the parents and the ECCE centre.

It is also necessary to be aware of the role COVID-19 has had in parents shifting their concerns away from education to focus on more pressing needs caused by lack of income, hunger and managing co-morbidities with COVID-19. Ngwaru (2012:30) noted in a study conducted in Zimbabwe that parents in low-income environments focused on physiological needs, à la Maslow (1943) before being concerned about schooling. Soltero-Gonzalez and Gillanders (2021:966) highlight the need for awareness of the negative impact ECCE closures had on low-income communities that also perpetuated a deficit view of parents. The end of COVID19 pandemic is the opportunity to reconsider how to offer quality ECCE to children and families in underserved and poor communities who have not had access to ECCE centres (Atmore 2021:7).

Due to the closure of all ECCE centres from March to August 2020 there was little opportunity to develop meaningful interactions with parents, as the ECCE centres and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) shifted their focus to providing much needed food parcels (Learning in

Reach, 2021). Some ECCE centres also developed activity packs for caregivers to use with children during lockdown in their homes. Distributing these packs provide an opportunity for some connection between the centre and home (Bayat & Madyibi 2022; Kambouri et al., 2021). Early childhood care and education is the foundation of creating a relationship between centres and homes that acknowledges the role both parents and teachers have in the life of the child. In low Socio-Economic Status (SES) communities like Lavender Hill, parents rely on ECCE centres to care for and support their children when they go to work. ECCE centres are by and large privately funded, and whilst 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 the children in their care. Equally parents may believe they do not need to be involved as they do not have enough knowledge of education (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021:2).

If communities like Lavender Hill value ECCE for their children and actively participate, this will create a strong foundation for the children's future learning, academic and social success (Ngwaru, 2012:26). Understanding the value ECCE centres can have in supporting children and families occurs when parents are active participants in the life of the centres, building a collaborative community (Modise 2022:288). Advocating for access to early learning through quality ECCE centres is advantageous for children in poor communities who then avoid being disadvantaged in the formal schooling years (Giese et.al., 2022:6).

1.3.   Concept clarification

At the outset of the research study defining parent involvement, parent engagement and parent participation is vital to understanding how parents are considered within settings. In Chapter One I provide an overview of terms for clarity. The terms used will be explored in depth in chapter two as part of the literature review.

1.3.1.   Parent/family/caregiver

In society today families have many forms and structures. The idea of the nuclear family has evolved as there are multiple relationships the child is part of. It is important to define who the child's caregivers or parents are. The Children's Act 38 (South Africa, 2005) defines parents as any person who is biologically related to the child including adoptive parents. A child's primary care givers are those adults who take responsibility for the care and development of the child (De Witt, 2016:255). The primary caregivers may be the child's biological parents, their grandparents, older siblings, or extended family. The Green Paper on Families (South Africa, 2011) defines families as 'a group of interacting persons who recognise relationship with each other, based on common parentage, marriage and/or adoption'. Parental responsibilities include caring for the child, protecting the child and maintaining contact with the child ensuring the best interests of the child are considered. There is also an understanding that more than one person may have this responsibility (Children's Act, 2005). For the sake of clarity in this research I will use the phrase parent, to include all adults and caregivers who assume daily responsibility for the child at home.

1.3.2.   Parent involvement, engagement and participation.

The three phrases used to describe links between education settings and the home are *parent involvement, parent engagement* and *parent participation* which are used interchangeably. These terms are all aspects of partnership and vagueness regarding the terms may hinder quality parent participation (Kambouri et al., 2021). Collins and Fields-Smith (2024:98) support the idea that stakeholders in the setting need to agree on the benefits of parents being involved to ensure that effective 'parent-as-partner' involvement occurs.

1.3.2.1. *Parent involvement*

Encouraging communication between parents and teachers offers opportunities for improving academic levels for children, however Wilder (2013:378) states that 'there is lack of consensus regarding *parental involvement'*. Baxter and Kilderry (2021:2) define parent involvement as basic school-based interactions, where the communication is one way by the school telling parents how they can be of help in the school environment. Parent involvement happens when schools let parents know how they can be involved by developing strategies and approaches as parents may not be sure how they can be involved (Okeke, 2014:1). Teachers are eager for parents to be involved in the setting as there are links between parent involvement and the academic success of the children (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019; Van Laere et al., 2018). Parent involvement has also been explored as part of community partnership to include parents in their child's learning by seeing them as a resource (Venter et al., 2014).

1.3.2.2. *Parent Engagement*

Engagement is defined by Merriam Webster (2022) as being present. *Parent engagement* is depicted as sharing ideas about how parents can support their children in the home environment to improve learning that happens at school (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021:3). Dereli and Kurtça (2022: 36) elaborate on parent engagement as being vital to the success of the child in the setting. Parents can share their own knowledge and provide insight into how learning can be improved. The of level parent engagement is often linked to socio-cultural backgrounds and can give a false impression of how parents support their children. Parental engagement was proposed by Goodall and Montgomery (2014) as more than being involved by having a sense of ownership in the ECCE setting. Parent engagement advances involvement as it requires a commitment by parents to take ownership and engage in aspects of the ECCE centre sharing responsibility with the teachers. When parents engage in the ECCE centre their personal agency evolves as their contribution is valued and they are not 'left behind' (Ebrahim et al., 2023).

1.3.2.3. *Parent Participation*

Parent participation is the opportunity for parents to contribute to and share in the ECCE centre their child attends. Merriam Webster (2022) defines the term *participate* as 'to take part' or 'to have a share in something'. Being in partnership means everyone is working towards a common goal that is beneficial for all, providing the best opportunities for success (Cox-

Petersen, 2011:5). Parent participation is founded in cooperation between the ECCE centre and the parents through meaningful joint activities and active support of activities in the setting (Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019:48). Parent participation occurs when the setting and parents have a shared vision of collaboration that is equitable and sustainable (Krijnen et al., 2022:265). Participation allows people to share their thoughts and ideas in a meaningful way. To do this freely people need to feel safe and believe they are knowledgeable and have a right to participate. Sang and Syomwene (2018) suggest that when parents are encouraged to participate, they add value to the social and educational wellbeing of the school. In low SES communities in South Africa parents may believe that because they have limited educational opportunities, they have nothing to offer the school (Hall et al., 2019; Sang & Syomwene, 2018). Encouraging parent participation requires the ECCE setting to provide the space for open communication where parents can add their voice by participating in decision-making within the setting (Erlina et al., 2024:53). As this study is based in South Africa, chapter 2 offers the opportunity to explore the importance of parent participation and how it is perceived and promoted in both in Western countries and South Africa.

For this study, I will be using the term parent participation. Authors (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021; Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019; Sang & Syomwene, 2018) refer to parent engagement or parent involvement, and I use their terminology with the intention of moving the conversation from parent involvement to parent participation based on open, democratic dialogue for collaboration and social cohesion.

1.3.3. Early Childhood Care and Education

This study is situated within an Early Childhood Care and Education Centre (ECCE) in Lavender Hill. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a term used to explain the role of teachers in Early childhood development (ECD) to support the learning and development of babies and children until their first year of formal schooling (South Africa. DBE, 2017). Early childhood development focuses on children from 0-9 years (South Africa. DoE,2001). ECCE is described as a field of specialisation for teachers within ECD in an effort to professionalise the sector (Harrison, 2020). ECCE is critical in ensuring the rights of children to health, protection, and development (Moses, 2021). More recently the 2030 strategy for early childhood development programmes (South Africa. DBE, 2023) provides a plan to achieve collaboration and co-operation between all stakeholders in the ECD sector, including families and communities. The importance of the relationship between ECD teachers and families will be explored in chapter 2 to include the value of parent participation within the ECCE sector. There is a call to professionalise the people who work within the ECCE sector (Harrison, 2020; Atmore, 2016; Excell, 2016) by acknowledging that those who work in the sector are more than carers and practitioners but are teachers who have an impact on the lives of the children and families in the ECCE settings. This study uses the term teacher to describe those in the ECCE centre who work with the children and families to support the community.

1.3.4.   Low socio-economic status communities (SES)

Low-socioeconomic status (SES) is ascribed to households or communities that have little income, single parents and located in poor communities (Zizzamia et al.,2019). These communities are areas where there tends to be high levels of unemployment. Low SES communities are affected with high levels of crime, food insecurity and drug and alcohol abuse (Allie, 2021:20). Watson and Ryan (2014) describe Lavender Hill as a community filled with gangs and drugs where community members live in fear. There is low-cost government housing as well as informal homes. There also tends to be a high dropout rate from school, which contributes to the lack of income generation. A significant portion of children in rural areas of South Africa, 65%, lack access to early childhood education, services and opportunities (Ashley-Cooper, 2021).

1.4.   A national perspective of parent participation

As South Africa has moved historically from an Apartheid past towards democracy it is imperative to be aware of the past influences on our understanding of how parents believe they can and should participate meaningfully in the educational life of their child. There needs to be an awareness of the parents' lived experiences of being at school as this influences their own beliefs and ideas about how they should be involved. Soltero-González and Gillanders (2021:966) refer to the notion of 'academic socialisation' where schools explore parents' understanding of school norms and expectations in order to support them particpating more actively. When parents are encouraged to contribute they are more supportive of the teachers as their contributions are valued as part of the community (Meier & Lemmer 2015:2).

Although it is generally agreed that attending ECCE is beneficial for children, being able to access ECCE is often a challenge for parents in low SES communities (Adams-Ojugbele & Moletsane, 2019:1). Parents in low SES communities do not often have the resources to pay for ECCE and this leads to poor infrastructure and the establishment of playgroups by people within the community who have little to no training (Atmore, 2012:32). A home-based approach to ECCE also exists within low SES communities and if teachers have some form of qualification, they tend to have limited knowledge (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022:463). The challenges within low SES communities often leads to the community working together to raise and support the children (Modise, 2022:290). As the value and importance of attending ECCE grows parents and communities are pursuing the establishment of well-resourced and registered centres (Allie, 2021:20).

In Africa children from low-income environments tend to have parents who have minimal or no involvement in their child's education and preschool programmes should include parent involvement and parent education as one of preparing children for formal schooling (Ngwaru, 2012:30). The increased demand to access ECCE brings into question the role of the parent to be involved (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022: 464). When parents are involved, it is because the setting has identified where parents can help, how they can contribute and what

they can participate in (Van Loggenberg et al., 2014:1228). Research by Okeke (2014) provides evidence that parents want to be involved in their child's education, but they are unsure of how to be involved. Parents express the desire to participate in the educational life of their children, but because they have no role model of this and may be unsure of how to do this (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019). Munje and Mncube (2018:88) allude to the fact that some parents do not want to be involved in the setting and view sending their children to the ECCE setting as having a break from their responsibilites. Shifting this view of the role of ECCE centres includes engaging with parents in activities that build the community and support the children (Hall et.al., 2019:36) The opportunitiy to develop positive parent participation exists if schools express a genuine desire for collaboration. ECCE settings may consider parent attendance at school events as a key indicator of their commitment and interest in their child. However, parents in low SES communities may have fewer opportunities to attend school functions as they may not be available due to having less control over their time, especially if they work (Modise, 2022; Bettencourt, et.al., 2020:4). Due to the challenges parents in low SES communities face home visits are a viable option to support families and build a community within the ECCE setting (Gwele & Ebrahim, 2018:161).

Encouraging parents in low SES areas to participate in and support the ECCE centre is the opportunity for them to know their input is valued, setting the tone for ongoing support of educational settings and children as they enter formal school (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022:2). How interactions between parents and the setting occur is influenced by the teachers and the training and guidance they have received to encourage participation (Adams-Ojugbele & Moltesane, 2019:4). Teachers need patience when working with families to build trust and mutual respect that benefits the families, the children and then the setting (Modise, 2022:299). As teachers act *in loco parentis,* it is valuable to consider how they encourage parents to be involved in the setting and if there are any unforeseen barriers or limitations to parent involvement (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022:7). Teachers in ECCE settings may equally believe they are not equipped to interact with parents. Bipath (2022) reflects on teacher professional identity, and how they view themselves in relation to the community around the ECCE. Teachers may be plagued with low self-esteem as society views them as mere babysitters, earning a very low wage with little to no qualifications. Harrison and Madingoaneng (2022:470) put teachers at the centre of creating opportunities for parents to participate in the setting. This includes knowing whether or not parents are able to attend meetings and school functions, making home visits and communicating with parents both formally and informally. Modise (2022: 290) encourages teachers to reflect on their practice when collaborating with parents and find opportunities to accommodate their needs to help them play a role in the educational life of their child by sharing information and planning together.

As the educational level of the parent also influences how they are invovled in the ECCE setting it is important that teachers guard against discriminating against parents who have little

understanding of the need for their involvement (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:173). Parents may decide which ECCE setting to enrol their child at based on convenience, or what the setting offers. Whatever guides their choice, parents have expressed concerns about teachers in ECCE settings not lsitening to them and their concerns (van den Berg & Ndoda, 2021:67). Parents' educational levels may lead to hesitation around getting involved in the ECCE centre as they doubt their own skills. This may create a barrier between the setting and the parents which can be overcome by relationship building between the individuals in the ECCE community looking for common purpose and benefits (Modise, 2022:295).

Bayat and Madyibi (2022:9) suggest that parents need a clear and realistic idea of how they can support their child at home and in the ECCE centre. Equally teachers want parents to give of their time and knowledge as it has a positive impact on the children and the setting (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:167). The impact of poverty in a family and their ability to support their children should not be overlooked and can be addressed by considering how a parent's level of involvement and participation in the ECCE setting may correlate with their own experiences and education levels (Venter, 2022:6). Creating a parental model provides a framework to include parents in the ECCE centre. The model of parent participation should engage the voice of the parents to support the ongoing development of democracy and social inclusivity within the ECCE setting and the wider community. Encourgaing active participation views parents as equal partners with the setting, changing their perceptions of what is expected of them and encouraging them to share their ideas and experiences.

1.5.   Policy imperatives for parent participation in ECCE

To develop an understanding of how South Africa approaches the role of parents within the ECCE setting it is pertinent to explore policy documents pertaining to the role of the parents, as many ECCE centres use these documents to create operating procedures. Cagliari et al. (2016:267) cite Malaguzzi's view of policy documents as reflecting the country's political discourse within education. Kambouri et al. (2021) posit that it is not easy to legislate parent participation as there is no clear understanding of it. There may also be a gap between policy and implementation in the ECCE setting (Munje & Mncube, 2018:84). It is important to consider how policies translate into practice as there do not appear to be any guidelines about how to involve parents in a meaningful way, practically. Biersteker et al. (2022:216) upfront the issue of various glaring challenges in ECCE despite the prioritisation at a policy level of ECCE in South Africa. Creating policies does not always ensure successful implementation of the ideas, especially if there is no explicit practical advice given.

Prior to 1994 government policy stated that parents and families were responsible for the development of young children and the State did not have a role to play (South Africa, 1995:7). In general, all post-apartheid policy documents acknowledge the role of parents as the primary educators of their children.   In post-apartheid South Africa, the policy on Minimum Requirements for Qualifications for Early Childhood Educators (MRQEECCE) acknowledges

the pivotal role ECCE centres play within the life of families and communities (South Africa, 2017:18). ECCE centres are accountable to the parents and the community they are set in. Good quality ECCE centres recognise parents and primary caregivers as the child's first educators by acknowledging cultural norms and diversity of each family (Van As et al., 2020:1). Teachers need to find commonality with the parents and view them as the experts of their children and have a vital role to play in the child's education. This approach sees the parents as the experts on their own children and gives them a voice (Fenton et al., 2017:222). In 2021 the Department of Basic Education (DBE) conducted an ECD census to better understand the ECD landscape in South Africa (South Africa, 2021). It looked at services and programmes offered by ECD with the intention of using the information to improve and expand ECD in South Africa. This is also in line with moving ECD from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the DBE.

The policy documents relevant to ECCE in South Africa include The Interim policy for Early Childhood Development (South Africa. Department of Education, 1995), The National Early Learning and Development Standards (NELDS) (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2009), White Paper 5 on Education (South Africa. Department of Education, 2001), The National Curriculum Framework for Children Birth to Four Years (NCF) (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2015) and the South African Schools Act (South Africa, 1996). These policy documents all expound the importance of family and community to support child development. The voice of parents is considered important in the development of democracy by transforming ECCE by taking account of all the stakeholders (Ebrahim, 2014:70). Approaches to parents and schooling is perceived as the foundation of democracy by creating equal rights for all (South Africa. Department of Education, 2001). ECCE policies and practices should also build on democratic approaches that include the voice of all stakeholders to address needs and support social transformation by breaking down barriers (Van Laere et al., 2018:197).

Analysis of the South African Schools Act (South Africa. DoE, 1996) made it evident that the role of parents within schools is limited to being involved at the level of the school governing body and to commit to paying the stipulated fees of the school their child attends. There was no evidence of the need for the parent to participate in the school. Munje and Mncube (2018:88) acknowledge that "the existing gap between the promulgations of the South African Schools Act … and what currently manifests, especially in disadvantaged schools" needs to be addressed. Schools need to encourage parent participation and effective partnerships between teacher and parents. A policy brief by CREATE (2011) reported, in their research, that parents were not aware of the role of the School Governing Body (SGB) and had not attended any SGB meetings.

Education White Paper 5 (South Africa. DBE, 2001) evidences the importance of all stakeholders being involved in supporting child development (Harrison & Madingoaneng,

2022:466). The policy asserts that ECD teachers need to meet the needs of the parents to ensure children are successful in the setting. This assertion is founded on the premise that parents often ask for support and advice as they struggle to offer their children the best opportunities they can. The primary responsibility of children lies with the parents who are also tasked with bearing the economic cost of the running of ECD centres in communities. The policy suggests parents and grandparents should be educated and empowered to meet the demands of child-rearing, however there is no suggestion of how this will occur.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (South Africa. DBE, 2015) acknowledges the role parents and caregivers have in working alongside ECD teachers. Working together provides the opportunity to create social transformation through the facilitation of high-quality experiences that support child development. The NCF also focuses on teachers connecting with families and being aware of the context's children live in, using this information to create and develop the curriculum by including families in the child's learning. Offering quality ECD programmes supports economically challenged families with the intention of reducing significant inequalities (Venter, 2022:3).

The Interim Policy for Early Childhood Education (South Africa. DoE, 1995) highlights the importance of ECCE programmes developing ideas that support families as they help meet the needs of their children. Parents are described as not having the necessary skills to support children academically, largely due to their own lack of education. ECCE centres are considered spaces that can provide support and skills development for parents. Doing this helps develop effective ECCE programmes based on involvement and participation in the structures that creates a support system around the child to ensure continuity between home and the setting. The policy does acknowledge the role NGOs have in setting up and supporting community-based ECCE centres.

The DBE Schooling 2025 action plan (South Africa. DBE, 2010) encourages parents to be at the centre of the learning process (Motala & Deacon, 2011). 'Successful parent involvement in the child's education means active, ongoing participation of a parent in the education of his or her child' (South Africa. DBE, 2017:7). Through parent participation teachers are empowered to develop supportive, high functioning learning environments where children thrive. There is acknowledgement of the African saying "it takes a village to raise a child" (South Africa. DBE 2017:5). Parents, ECCE centres and the wider community have a joint responsibility supporting children. For this to be effective clear, open dialogue needs to be established. Included in this action plan is a set of 27 goals, one of which is to 'Improve parent and community participation in the governance of schools, partly by improving access to important information via the e-Education strategy' (South Africa. DSD, 2011:9).

NELDS (South Africa. DBE, 2009) has a clear focus on the importance of the early childhood development leading to better outcomes in later life. Parents are provided with information and knowledge to ensure children are supported at home. The document focuses on the need to

support parents by offering parenting programmes that support the child developmentally and academically. Suggesting parent programmes may present a deficit view of parents as they are expected to improve their knowledge and practice of supporting their children (Marlow et al., 2024:90). An integrated approach to supporting children is valued as the best way to help children develop holistically (South Africa. DBE, 2009). ECCE centres are viewed as places that can create social change by affirming family's culture to transform South Africa (Padayachee et al., 2023:4).

Van Wyk (2011:200) states that 'political, ideological, cultural and social factors affect education policies and practices within a country'. Policies should deliberate the role of parent participation in their child's education to develop a positive and democratic approach to families regardless of their structure. The ECCE policies in South Africa should work to reflect the idea of democratic partnership, especially when engaging parents taking the context specific challenges into account. Everyone can be empowered to build the community through communication and awareness of challenges to reduce barriers and build strong relationships between the parents and the ECCE centres (Watson & Ryan, 2014:78).

Developing an understanding of how ECCE teachers and parents within Lavender Hill understand the role of parent participation will support the development of a democratic model for parent participation in this research. This model has the potential to promote highly collaborative parent participation with teachers which will contribute to children's success. The effect of this is the creation of an inclusive community that works together. It is also important to gain insight into how parents and ECCE centres understand parent participation and what potential barriers may exist to this happening in a meaningful way. This exploration includes how the voices of the parents are considered, as well as how parents hear the needs of the ECCE centre in supporting their children.

1.6.   Aims and Objectives of the research study

The research aim is to co-construct a model of parent participation that is relevant to one ECCE centre in Lavender Hill, which could be transposed into other ECCE and school contexts in South Africa. This model will be co-constructed collaboratively with the parents, teachers and principals, using an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Deciding on the research approach was supported by engaging with the research onion suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) to make decisions whilst developing the approach to this research. This will be elaborated on in chapter four.

1.6.1.   Research Questions

1.6.1.1. Main Research Question

How can a model for parental participation be developed in ECCE centres that activates social cohesion?

1. What understandings exist in the setting about parent participation?
2. What experiences exist in the ECCE centre to support parent participation?
3. What policies and procedures support parent participation?
4. What value do participants place on parent participation?

1.6.2. Objectives of the Research Study

To achieve the aims it is important to create the opportunity for all these stakeholders to have a voice in the creation of a model that is relevant to their unique ECCE environment. Providing the opportunity for collaboration supports the notion of providing opportunities for parents and teachers to have personal agency, to develop democracy and community cohesion.

Co-creating a model of parent participation begins with engaging in conversations with all stakeholders. The objectives of this research study help in the co-creation of the parent model.

The *first objective* is to explore understandings of parent participation from both the parents and the teachers' perspectives. The understanding the participants have influences how participation occurs, based on personal experiences.

The *second objective* is to investigate how parents participate practically within the setting on an ongoing basis, as well as how the teachers encourage active ongoing participation. This objective aligns with the notion that ongoing practical participation in the daily life of the setting encourages parents to be part of the decision-making processes as well.

Reviewing the ECCE centres documents around parent participation is the *third objective* of the study. The established policies present to all the stakeholders how meaningful participation occurs. The policies can also be reviewed with the parent body regularly. To avoid a status quo within the setting. Reviewing policies and procedures is the opportunity to reflect on practices within the setting and offers the opportunity to have open dialogue as the community works together building a socially cohesive community.

Ensuring a co-constructed model of parent participation is both implemented and reflected on within the ECCE centre is the *fourth objective* of the study. Co-constructing the model during the research process includes offering support to the ECCE centre once the model is implemented within the setting. Reflecting on what is working well, and what needs to be further developed aligns with the fifth AI principle of creating destiny.

Examining understanding and approaches to parent participation within the setting intends to help shift the approach from parent involvement to one of democratic parent participation. This will be done in chapter 5 by developing insight into understanding the views, held by teachers and parents, on the benefits and challenges of parental participation, in this one site.

1.7.   Research approach

An interpretivist qualitative approach was employed in this study. Denzin et al (2024:5) allude to the value of this approach being common sense as it includes the opportunity to consider where power lies for the participants. A qualitative approach provided the opportunity to explore and examine literature on parent participation to gain a detailed understanding of the interpretations of the phenomenon (File et al., 2017). Researching in natural settings that are socially constructed supports the qualitative researcher to interpret practices and use this to transform practices that bring meaning to the participants in the setting (Denzin, Lincoln, Giardina & Cannella, 2024: 14). Employing an interpretivist paradigm aligns with qualitative research as the researcher and participants are more than passive recipients of the world around them. Social knowledge and understanding are developed through personal interpretation of naturally occurring phenomena, in this case parent participation (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2014: 15). The research approach is developed and elaborated on in chapter 4 where the use of figured worlds (Kamberelis, Dimitriadis & Welker, 2018) is employed to interpret communities of practice and shared understandings of the phenomena being researched.

Data collection occurred in four stages, starting with reading through the school's documents that were created to provide accountability of the stakeholders involved in the ECCE centre. Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity for the teachers and members of the parent body to share their lived experience of parent participation. The participants of the semistructured interviews were asked to keep a journal to document interactions they had with the teachers and the ECCE centre. Finally, a one-day Appreciative Inquiry workshop was held providing an opportunity for all the stakeholders to collaborate and co-construct a model of parent participation based on their experiences, knowledge and understanding of what is possible and attainable in terms of parent participation within this ECCE setting. Chapter 4 details the data collection process providing insight into the success and challenges of each.

1.8.   Implications of the Research Study

This research is aimed at providing the opportunity to co-construct parent participation based on democratic principles that are founded on a humanising pedagogy. The findings provide evidence that the voice of parents and teachers can be instrumental in creating opportunities for ongoing meaningful participation within ECCE settings. Parents and teachers are eager to work together for the benefit of the children, the ECCE centre and the community around the centre. Offering opportunities to share understanding and experiences provide the space for all stakeholders to find common ground.

The AI workshop was attended by all the mothers in the setting and the conversations, and community building that occurred in the workshop created connections that have perpetuated by offering non-judgemental dialogue where all voices were acknowledged and encouraged.

The key themes emerging from the findings support the idea that parents and teachers can work together to build a supportive and collaborative community. Taking time to share personal experiences and understandings of parent participation provided a platform for the participants to be open to learning from and with each other to ensure participation.

The nature of the AI requires a commitment to reflecting on how parent participation is being experienced within the ECCE centre, with the opportunity to review policies and practices that support the changes that occur within the setting. All stakeholders also made personal statements of commitment to participation, which creates accountability both to the individual and the ECCE community.

This research study fills a gap in literature by including a humanising pedagogy that upfronts the voices of all the stakeholders in the setting. Including the experiences and understandings of both parents and teachers is the opportunity to empower the entire community as they collaborate to support each other meaningfully. Exploring how participation can transform a community aligns with the concepts of ubuntu and social cohesion, in line with the new democratic South Africa.

1.9.   The Contribution of Knowledge

Clear connections are always made between the value of parents and ECCE centres working towards a common purpose to support children in the setting. Existing models of parent participation suggest that educational settings are the custodians of how parents participate. Shifting from parent involvement towards democratic parent participation there is the need to consider how to bring the voice of the parents into settings through collaboration. This research study is the opportunity to upfront the voices of the parents and teachers in one ECCE setting. Using the knowledge and experiences they have of parent participation is used to co-construct a bespoke model of parent participation within the setting.

1.10.   Limitations of the Research Study

This research study was conducted in one setting in a low SES community in the Western Cape. This was due to the nature of utilising an AI as one of the research tools to develop a site-specific model of parent participation. The outcome of the research was not affected as a generic model of parent participation was developed with the intention that other settings can employ it to co-construct bespoke parent participation. A further limitation existed in the semistructured interviews, when fewer parents arrived for the interview than were expected. This then limited the variety of personal experiences that could be collected as part of the data collection process. Potential barriers to the parents participating in the semi-structured interviews may have been perceived power being held by the researcher, as an outsider as well as parents feeling inadequate due to the socio-cultural environment. The research limitations are elaborated on in chapter four.

1.11.   The Researcher's Role

As the researcher in this study, I was aware of my objectivity and subjectivity. I was aware of the dynamics of perceived power the participants may have had towards me, as I am not part of the community but have fulfilled a mentoring and training role within the wider community as part of the NGO that established the ECCE centre.

As a lecturer in Montessori education and traditional education, I have had the opportunity to offer introductory sessions on teaching and learning for the teachers, offered by the NGO. I am aware that the participants of the study may then perceive me as more knowledgeable than them and may feel they will be judged. I discuss my positionality and role within the community in detail in chapter four, to ensure the participants are assured that I am not the expert of their lived experience and in the interest of a participatory approach, their views and experiences are valued.

I focused on building relationships with the parents in the setting during the process of data collection. I believe this was an important aspect to develop as I did not want the parents or teaches to view me as the more knowledgeable other, or that I was judging their ability to participate within the setting. Building relationships and displaying an eagerness to learn from the stakeholders in the setting helped them be comfortable with my presence and we engaged in conversations beyond the research. This reduced possible tensions and prejudices.

1.12.   Structure of the Research Study

This research study is presented in eight chapters:

Chapter 1 introduces the research study setting the foundation and background. National and international approaches to parent participation are considered and South African policies are explored. The chapter provides an overview of the aims and objective of the research study to contribute to the body of knowledge on parent participation.

Chapter 2 focuses on national and international approaches to parent participation. National and international literature on aspects of parent participation is reviewed to consider how other researchers have addressed approaches to the topic.

Chapter 3 investigates three theoretical frameworks to support how parent participation can be centred around collaboration and democratic dialogue. The theories of humanistic dialogue (Freire, 2005), Communities of Practice (Wenger 2002) and Pedagogy-in-Participation (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012) underpin the research. The conceptual framework was developed from the three theoretical underpinnings of the research as well as ubuntu (Bangura, 2005) and employed in the discussion to consider how best to support parent participation.

Chapter 4 outlines the research design and methodology including the approaches to collecting and analysing the data for the study. The interpretative qualitative research approach

is covered and includes an overview of the participants, the data collection methods and data analysis. This chapter discusses the four data collection tools including the limitations encountered.

Chapter 5 presents the findings and discussion of the research by interpreting the data regarding experiences and understanding of parent participation. Reflexive thematic analysis resulted in three key themes which are then explored in relation to the literature in Chapter 2.

Chapter 6 provides a summary of the findings and themes in relation to the theoretical and conceptual framework whilst answering the research questions. The research objectives are addressed to ensure the voice of the participants is present in the co-creation of a parent participation model.

Chapter 7 collates the key findings to develop a generic model of parent participation. The model is explained as a tool to co-construct parent participation that is site-specific and makes suggestions for aspects to consider when employing a democratic approach to parent participation.

Chapter 8 is the conclusion of the research study. It summarises the main research findings and discussion, using them to present recommendations for the implementation of a bespoke parent participation model.

Chapter 2 An analysis of literature

2.1.   Introduction

Nationally and internationally research has shown that high levels of parent participation and interaction in Early Childhood and care settings is beneficial to children growing and thriving at the ECCE centre and within the community (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022; Modise, 2022; Krijnen et al., 2022; Oostdam & Hooge, 2013; Lee et al., 2013). Parents who are involved and participate in their child's education create a constructive response to learning. This has a positive impact on children's school performance and their personal well-being (Collins & Fields-Smith, 2024; Nutbrown & Cook, 2023:60). Fostering an ECCE environment in Lavender Hill that values the parents as participants in decisions, both academically and communally, supports the concept of promoting social cohesion through the democratic inclusion of all voices. To do this effectively there are many aspects that need consideration. These include how teachers communicate with parents, how parents understand their own role in supporting their children and the physical context of the ECCE centre (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022; Modise, 2002; Kambouri et al., 2021).

At the outset it is vital to understand how vulnerable communities view early childhood care. Atmore (2021) notes that many children in poor communities are not part of an ECD setting. In April 2022 the DBE released the Thrive by Five Index Report (Giese et al., 2022:4) outlining how well preschool children are faring in South Africa with the intention of determining if

children have the support they need to be successful in school. The report established that even though social and emotional functioning influences learning outcomes for children, 27.5% of South African children in Grade R are not meeting the expected standard (2022:5). Maintaining meaningful parent involvement in ECCE is a means of supporting good social, emotional, and educational outcomes for children (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022:2). The views schools have of parents in vulnerable communities appear to be that parents are not interested or engaged in their children's education (Collins & Fields-Smith, 2024:100). This notion must be challenged as it is often based on a white, middle-class perspective of parent involvement. This perspective must be challenged as it views vulnerable communities as operating in a deficit instead of valuing the contributions that can be made (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020:162). The cultural capital the parents have needs to be included and valued as a contribution towards the life of the ECCE setting.

There are many factors to consider, including the role ECCE centres can play as initiators of relationship building between schools and families. In general, parent-teacher partnerships are not a choice, but rather assigned, relying on the teachers to create opportunities for collaboration (Jevtić, 2023:128). The intention of this should be to support children and establish good foundations for quality community relationships whilst developing social cohesion. One of the post-COVID challenges faced by ECCE centres in South Africa, is that attendance by children has not increased to the pre-COVID levels and this threatens the ability to improve the quality of ECCE services in South Africa (Wills et al., 2021; Spaull, 2021; Ebrahim et al., 2021). Enticing families back into ECCE settings, especially in vulnerable communities has the capacity to improve future academic success and build a stronger community (Kral et al., 2021:8). When ECCE centres are embedded within the community there are natural opportunities for relationships between the families and the teachers and the centre can also become a hub of resources for the wider community (Henry & Giese, 2023:18).

Watson and Ryan (2014) describe social cohesion as a way of developing resilience within communities who face many challenges. Social cohesion is developed by schools and families partnering democratically through common discourse, creating a dynamic relationship between parents and teachers who collaborate to support the children (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). A challenge to this is that children and families who live in low-income areas do not necessarily have access to quality ECCE settings (Ebrahim, 2023:1). Having access to an ECCE centre within a disadvantaged community is viewed as a positive move towards reducing poverty and the exclusion of children from formal schooling (Mokibelo, 2022:42). The intention of building a community that allows children to thrive can start within the ECCE setting and has the potential to influence the wider community.

COVID-19 had a devastating effect on families and schools globally (Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021; Okagbue et al., 2023). School closures and social distancing forced teachers and parents to adapt to new approaches to learning. There have been benefits of families

spending more time together, but also an awareness that children may be more vulnerable as there are fewer adults to rely on for their basic needs (Okagbue et.al., 2023:93). The longterm effects of poverty on child development cannot be ignored. In vulnerable communities like Lavender Hill, children had less access to food as ECCE centres were forcibly closed. Children were also left unsupervised on the streets. Financial constraints and COVID fears prevented parents sending their children back to ECCE centres when they reopened (O'Keeffe et al., 2022).

Remote learning meant parents and teachers needed to collaborate and improve communication as many children were no longer in ECCE centres. The challenge of not having access to technology also affected parents' ability to make provision for teaching and learning (Shaik, 2023; Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021b). Parents may have been challenged to balance the demands of remote working with needing to care for their children (Okagbue et.al., 2023:2). Kambouri et al. (2021) also deliberate the importance of creating partnerships with parents as the link between school and home is important to establish meaningful interactions, especially considering parents had to take charge of academic aspects of their children's lives. Generally, until COVID-19, in South Africa "there is no model available to support parents and teachers" (Kambouri et al., 2021:2) within schools and ECCE centres. A model that improves communication between ECCE centres and parents offers an opportunity for the collaboration and personal agency of all the stakeholders (Jevtic, 2023; Kambouri, et.al., 2021). COVID-19 paved the way for more regular communication between schools and parents. This communication needed to be two-way communication where parents could ask for help from teachers and teachers would check in with the families on a regular basis (Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021a).

The lessons learned from COVID-19 can support the development of models for meaningful parent participation. 'Digital inequality' (Shaik, 2023:79) challenged the maintenance of relationships and quality teaching and learning during COVID-19, with parents and children in ECCE centres. Twala (2021) asserts that the lessons from COVID-19 are a time for us to 'build back better'. COVID-19 paved the way for real dialogical relationships to develop between home and school, building real relationships and a better understanding of everyone's needs (Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021a). ECCE settings can use the opportunities from COVID-19 to develop relationships with the families in the community, providing practical and emotional support as needed. This also creates an environment where trust and collaboration are the core of working together (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022).

2.2. The Voice of parents in Early Childhood Education

In the South African context *family* can be constructed in many ways. The Department of Social Development's Green Paper on Families acknowledges the diversity of families in South Africa, including the establishment of the coloured community originating from slavery (South Africa, 2011). The Green Paper further recognises the various ways families in South Africa

are constituted and the importance of supporting these diverse constructions of family. (Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021b) believe that collaborating with families is a vital tool to support children learning allowing a disruption of existing inequalities within ECCE.

In low socio-economic settings there is the possibility that parents do not believe they can participate in the ECCE setting (Mokibelo, 2022; Baxter & Kilderry, 2021). This may be evidenced in their hands off approach as they determine that their socio-economic status affects the value they can provide to the setting. The parents rely on the principal and teachers to be decision-makers and are unaware of the value they can provide to the setting (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:173). Parents underestimate the responsibility they have as they determine the principal has all the power. ECCE centres should be welcoming and encourage parents to participate by emphasising the value parent participation for the children, the centre and the wider community the centre is part of. It is important for teachers and principals to understand that lack of parent participation does not mean parents do not value what the centre is doing (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:176).

Bayat and Madyibi (2022:2) allude to the value of parent participation as a way of making sure any ECCE programmes are successful. When parents and schools collaborate in shared decision-making, it contributes towards positive parent participation. Collaboration between parent and schools includes deciding what aspects of decision-making parents are included in to ensure there is clarity regarding expertise and responsibilities are clearly defined. This allows for clear lines of communication and reduces potential conflict between parents and schools (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019)..Existing discourses around decision-making and leadership need to be challenged to change values and assumptions (Moss, 2011:4). These values include the knowledge families have regarding their own practices, language and culture (Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021a). Sharing knowledge, values and family practice allows for a more dialogical approach and encourages parents to initiate activities within the ECCE setting. Families should be viewed as partners with the setting and not separate from it (McQuade & Stewart, 2023). This approach provides an opportunity to develop connections between school and home (Epstein, 2019: 11). Parents need to be educated to understand that teachers want more than superficial relationships with them and value their input in matters pertaining to the centre. Having open, clear communication also develops a sense of ownership of the ECCE setting by the parents. This communication helps parents have a sense of how to support their children academically, socially, and emotionally as well as building a collaborative school community. Segoe and Bisschoff (2019: 169) state that parents are to be encouraged to know they play a vital role in the running of the ECCE setting and need to be actively encouraged to share in the management of important aspects of the setting.

ECCE has the potential to create spaces for the development of democratic practices through participation (Moss, 2011:4). How ECCE centres encourage parent participation enhances

cooperation between the centre and home as well as supporting children's experiences in a positive way. Hall et al. (2019:6) state many children in South Africa are born into environments that limit their chances to reach their full potential. This makes access to quality ECCE that supports parent participation, critical as a step towards reducing socio-economic inequality (2019:6). ECCE centres must consider the context families live in, especially within disadvantaged communities and use this information to help empower parents to improve the academic lives of their children (Ebrahim & Pascal, 2016).

Kustiani and Fauziyah (2019:14) speculate that how parents are perceived by the schools and teachers is a valuable as parents have the greatest influence on their children regarding the importance and value of education. This influence starts in ECCE and sets the tone for all future schooling experiences the children have. The parents' level of education affects how parents feel they can be involved, as well as how they are treated by the ECCE centre. They further state, 'Factors affecting parental participation include age, educational background, income and occupation' (2019:53). The idea that socio-economic and education levels of the parents play a role in their ability to participate in the ECCE centre will be something that needs to be considered within the Lavender Hill community.

2.2.1. A humanising pedagogy and dialogical approach towards parents

Families and the social structure they live in are important role players in education and it is important that ECCE centres work with the families they have and not impose 'norms' that may not be relevant to the context the ECCE centre is in (van Wyk, 2011). Freire (1998:x) describes schools 'as part and parcel of the fabric of any democratic society'. The implication is that schools are important in the establishment of democracy. This is where opportunities are consciously developed to allow for a humanising pedagogy (Freire, 2005:68). The intention is that everyone is encouraged to communicate their lived experiences to create a collaborative community. This is more than just 'knowing'. It is about 'involving' people. It is more than just giving people a 'voice'. It is about learning about each other to developing knowledge. Making use of a 'humanising pedagogy' encourages us be aware of the needs of others as we communicate and act on our intentions (Freire, 1998: xiii). Developing a model of parent participation involves giving agency to parents and teachers to support children in the ECCE. Agency is something people do, not something people have (Priestley et al., 2012:3). ECCE settings are encouraged to find ways to support open two-way communication between school and home, moving from a school centred approach to parent involvement towards a community and parent centred approach (Van Laere et al., 2018:197). A model of parent participation must champion dialogue and personal agency to develop social cohesion within the community of the school.

2.2.2. A humanising pedagogy

In educational settings a humanising pedagogy occurs when the uniqueness of each family is valued and supported. Moss and Cameron (2020:225) elaborate on a humanising pedagogy

as an interconnection of cooperation, democracy and equality to promote opportunities and social cohesion. Recognising the cultural capital of the parents and families creates a respectful interaction of ideas when exploring new ways of working together. Through strong communication the teachers in the setting establish trusting and supportive relationships and parents know they are valued in the ECCE (Henry & Giese, 2023:18). This is the opportunity for the immediate community in the setting to feel empowered as they share their experiences and contribute to the community. When the parents share their personal insights and experiences it empowers them and helps them take an active and democratic role by participating for the common good of the ECCE setting (Shaik, 2024:7). A 'humanising pedagogy' empowers all stakeholders in the environment and reduces oppressive, autocratic structures that have been created outside of the context of the ECCE centre.

2.2.3. A dialogical approach

Dialogical conversations are when meaning and purpose is shared between people to better understand individual views and experiences. The intention of dialogic conversation is to better understand ideas and stimulate thought to create change which is empowering (Alexander, 2020:1). Developing knowledge and understanding of people within the community happens with meaningful, curious dialogue (Freire, 2005). In a vulnerable community like Lavender Hill, one needs to consider the benefits and challenges of ECCEs building these relationships authentically. Bilateral communication is the opportunity for the stakeholders in the setting to feel heard, as well as knowing they have a voice to share their ideas. If there are constraints with self-expression, it can be challenging to engage in dialogue that helps co-construct meaning and understanding as participants in the dialogue are passive and do not actively contributing to the dialogue (Spyrou, 2000:64). In developing democratic dialogue in Lavender Hill, it is vital the experiences within this particular social setting are taken into consideration. It is fundamental to avoid South African generalisations and experiences, assuming they are true of Lavender Hill. ECCE centres should work with the families in a way that supports them and not according to suggested stereotypes (van Wyk, 2011:203).

Dialogue supports knowledge creation, using two-way conversations. Those involved in the dialogue are seen as equals and there is a transformation as we work 'with' people developing a 'humanising pedagogy'. Respect and tolerance are vital components of conversations (Freire, 1998:66) as having a voice does not give one the right to be irresponsible or demand you get what you desire. Instead, two-way conversations allow teachers and parents to build knowledge and support together. Dialogue is a twofold approach of having a say and learning to listening to what is being said by others (Freire, 1998:65). This supports the inclusion of the community that has an innate knowledge of the space it operates in. This knowledge is regarded as valuable and reduces a paternalistic approach to the ECCE centre. The stakeholders in the centre hold information vital to the ECCE centre. A democratic approach to dialogue is a social act between those in the community sharing common interests (Orberg,

Olsson & Klang, 2024:4). This reduces arrogance as all stakeholders know some things; and communicating personal knowledge supports collaboration as well as the belief in others.

2.3.   Models of Parent Involvement

Nationally and internationally (Ebrahim & Waniganayake, 2022; Li et.al., 2020; Munje & Mncube, 2018; Oostdam & Hooge, 2012; Motala & Deacon, 2011) the value of parent involvement in schools is described as valuable to the success of the children. Building relationships between the school and the parents is based on clear and honest communication to support children being academically, socially, and emotionally supported (Smith et.al., 2022; Janssen et.al., 2012). On the African continent ECCE and parent involvement in settings is a relatively new concept (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022:463). Parents' experiences of involvement and their own level of education and economic challenges are likely to impact parent support of the ECCE setting (Nutbrown & Cook, 2023:60). This could also make collaboration between the setting and the home a challenge, especially in communities where parents work and are not available during the school day (Modise, 2022:289). Teachers are viewed as professionals and can play a role in breaking down potential barriers between the setting and home (McQuade & Stewart, 2023; Chan & Ritchie, 2016). In South Africa many educational settings appear to assume the role of being the experts in imparting skills and knowledge to parents, thereby setting the expectations of how and when parents and families can be involved (Hiatt-Michael, 2005:5). COVID-19 also highlighted the challenges ECCE settings and parents in low socio-economic communities' face, including access to ECCE and maintaining communication (Ebrahim et al., 2021:211). COVID-19 was a catalyst for the creation of partnerships between schools and parents where both had to adapt to a new way of interacting and working together in the best interest of the children (Keengwe & Onchiwari, 2022; Krijnen et.al., 2021; Kambouri et.al., 2021). Exploring suggested models of parent involvement provide a starting point for how parents and schools have worked together.

2.3.1.   Epstein's Model of Parent Involvement

Epstein's (2019) model of parent involvement is widely used to encourage parent involvement at various levels within schools. Epstein (1985) focuses on the importance of the connection between home and school regardless of the socio-economic status of the family. If schools have families and teachers collaborating, the school will be successful. She discovered that teachers who consciously involve parents in aspects of the school life are highly regarded by the parents as they are seen as hardworking and committed (1985:20). Epstein explored the possibility of how teachers and schools can influence parent engagement and participation in schools. To this end Epstein suggests that schools 'design parent involvement programs to include more parents at home in activities…[and] policies needed to support the involvement of parents' (1985:24).

Epstein (1992) developed a model of parent involvement that considered how parents could be involved and what the outcome of the involvement would be. Figure 2.1. represents the

framework for the typology of parent involvement including practical examples of how parents can be involved.

Table 2-1 Epstein's Framework Source: Epstein (2019:20)

TABLE 1.1.1 Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnership and Sample Practices

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Help all families establish home environments to support children as students	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children's progress	Recruit and organize parent help and support	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development

Sample Practices

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level	Conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-ups as needed	School and classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents	Information for families on skills required for students in all subjects at each grade	Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees (e.g., curriculum, safety, personnel) for parent leadership and participation	Information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services
Workshops, videotapes, computerized phone messages on parenting and child rearing for each age and grade level	Language translators assist families, as needed. Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for review and comments	Parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families	Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home	Independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements	Information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students
Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g., GED, college credit, family literacy)	Parent-student pickup of report cards, with conferences on improving grades	Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers	Information on how to assist students to improve skills on various class and school assessments	District-level councils and committees for family and community involvement	Service integration through partnerships involving school; civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies and organizations; and businesses
Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services	Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications	Class parent, telephone tree, or other structures to provide all families with needed information	Regular schedule of homework that requires students to discuss and interact with families on what they are learning in class	Information on school or local elections for school representatives	Service to the community by students, families, and schools (e.g., recycling, art, music, drama, and other activities for seniors or others)
Home visits at transition points to preschool, elementary, middle, and high school; neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families	Clear information on choosing schools or courses, programs, and activities within schools. Clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, and transitions	Parent patrols or other activities to aid safety and operation of school programs	Calendars with activities for parents and students to do at home or in the community. Family math, science, and reading activities at school. Summer learning packets or activities. Family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work	Networks to link all families with parent representatives	Participation of alumni in school programs for students

This model is based on the school creating opportunities for parents to become involved in aspects of school life that create links between the home and the school. Epstein's model encourages parent involvement at various levels, from help with parenting to building relationships between the school, home, and the community (Epstein, 2019). One observation of Epstein's typology of parent involvement is that it is linear and does not account for parents being involved in more than one of the suggested involvement types; or that teachers may only encourage and support a limited form of parent involvement (Epstein, 1995).

Parent involvement is encouraged by sharing responsibility between the school, family and community to build partnerships. As a model it is a generic approach that is driven by the school deciding the anticipated level of parent involvement. Schools are encouraged to take a leadership role in creating and sustaining parent involvement (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

This may not necessarily be relevant or appropriate for individual school contexts. Epstein's typology may discount parents who do not appear to be involved and make assumptions of disinterest (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021:3). The model may consider parents from communities like Lavender Hill as lacking skills to contribute and support their children in school, assuming they do not value education. Baxter and Kilderry (2021:3) describe this as 'deficit thinking that invariably characterises parents as disengaged or inadequate'.

The initial model has been further developed to explore meaningful participation. Figure 2.1 represents Epstein's development of parent involvement with overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, et.al., 2006). Ostensibly, the overlapping spheres reflect the shared responsibility the parents, school and the wider community have supporting children. Epstein (2006) focuses on the importance of not seeing families as separate from the school, and partnerships are described as beneficial to the work of the school and what the teachers can do to improve the climate within the school for child academic success.
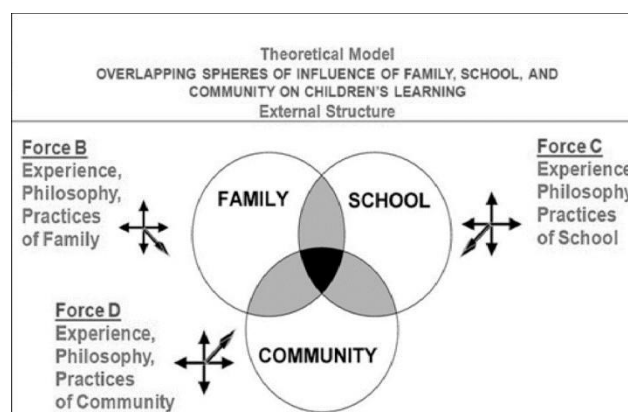
Figure 2-1 Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence Source: Epstein (2006)

Epstein (2002: 23) states: 'The school makes choices.' The communication that occurs is based on what the school decides is important to focus on, whether that is hard work, helping one another or knowing why school is important. Van Laere et.al., (2018) describe Epstein's model of parent involvement as being too 'school-centric' and operating in a 'democratic deficit' where schools think for parents and not with parents. Although Epstein and Sanders (2002) value the important roles families and schools play in educating children, they do not address the potential power imbalance between teachers and parents, especially in vulnerable communities. The narrative of parents operating from a deficit base needs to be developed into an asset-based approach by being aware of the complexities of the lives of families within the setting (Bettencourt, 2020; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020). There is an acknowledgement that historically there may have been conflict between families and schools due to poor communication and understanding of the goal, intentions and beliefs of the two (Epstein &

Sanders, 2002). Employing overlapping spheres of influence puts the children at the centre of education, however consideration needs to be given to the agendas of those in the spheres of influence. Teachers want to be supported by families to be successful in what they do; and families want to know what is happening at school to support their children as required (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

This model relies on a team of people within the school to manage how parents are involved, and it may be too rigid with how parents are allowed to be involved (Venter et al., 2014:1228). This model may not be relevant as a democratic approach to parent involvement within the South African context, as the 'overlapping spheres of influence' may maintain a separateness between the school and the family (Fenton et al., 2017:217). Epstein's model of parent involvement assumes that all parents are equal in a school setting, but the reality may be very different (Van Laere et al., 2018). Assuming equality may create further inequality as the individual parents needs and potential level of involvement are not considered; and if parents do not get involved in the 'expected' way, they may be perceived as being uninterested in their child's education. It is important to consider the need for open dialogue that supports the community within the ECCE setting, especially if it is to benefit children educationally.

2.3.2. Keyes Model of Parent-teacher Participation

In exploring models of parent-school partnerships, Keyes (2002) declares a general acknowledgement that these partnerships are important and equally hard to maintain. This could largely be due to the understandings each has about their role in the life of the child at school. Jacobs and Daniels (2020) refer to an education system that perpetuates a narrow view of the role parents can play within the school. Figure 2.2 reflects the ecology of the parents and teachers as these roles may be influenced by the beliefs and values, they hold of each other and whether they are based in the same community (Keyes, 2002). If parent involvement is based on a school's priorities and values it is possible that parents who struggle to meet these values are seen as a problem (Krijnen, 2022). Teachers may also not be part of the community they teach in and are viewed as 'outsiders' who do not understand the community they work in (Keyes, 2002).
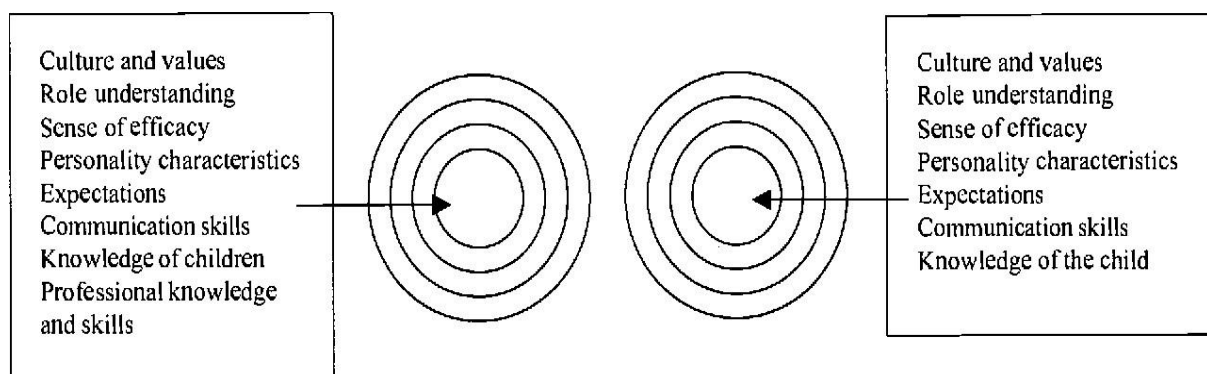
Keyes (2002:187) alluded to Epstein's typology as being too linear with a strong emphasis on communication. Communication between parents and teachers is established by the teachers and sets the tone for all interactions. For this to be successful there needs to be a clear understanding of the social system parents and teachers operate in, including their views on children. Keyes' model (2002) of parent-teacher participation relies on the teacher reflecting on their interactions with parents and monitoring how they approach parents, knowing that the interests of the child are at the centre of all parent-teacher interactions. The model takes the complexity of parent-teacher relationships into account and is adapted from Gentzel's social systems perspective, by regarding the impact interactions between people have on each other (2002:116).

The model is complex as it attempts to reflect the ecological system of the child, parent and teacher. The model also considers how cultural and social influences impacts how the child is viewed by both parent and teacher. There is the potential of a cultural distance between the teachers and the community they work in (Chan & Ritchie, 2016). To overcome this, the various forms of communication teachers use, evidenced in Figure 2.4, is an important component of the model. This model of parent participation is inclusive but is initiated by the teacher and requires reflection on the part of all participants. The objective of this model of parent involvement is one that encourages parents to develop a hands-on approach to their child's education, with support and input from the teachers as professionals (Keyes, 2002).
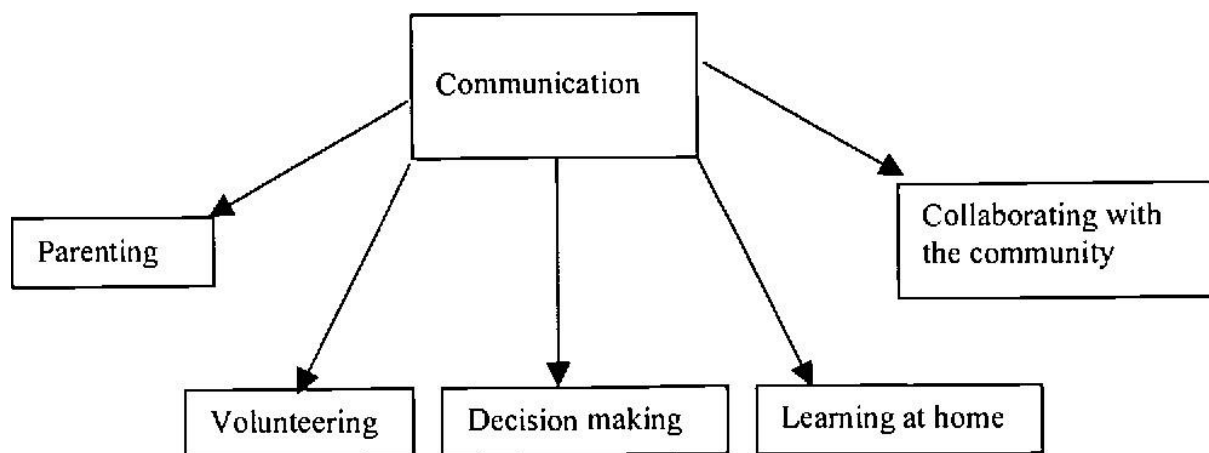
Figure 2-3 A theoretical framework for parent-teacher partnerships Source: Keyes (2002:187)

2.3.3. Kambouri Model for Parent Participation

Exploring the importance of communication and collaboration, Kambouri et al. (2021) discuss the importance of valuing the role parents play in the educational life of their children. COVID19 created the opportunity to explore how parent-teacher partnerships can be developed to support children's education. Their approach to parent participation relies on essential partnerships that includes parents, teachers, researchers, and policy makers (Krijnen et.al., 2022; Kambouri et al., 2021). This is done by looking at what characteristics would be needed to have a successful partnership, acknowledging all contributions making links between theory

and practice. The model of parent partnership they developed includes building trust and empowerment as a tool to offer support to families. Central to the model is two-way communication. Excell (2016) includes the need for supportive communication as one of the essential indicators of quality within the setting. The ECCE centre should create an environment that fosters co-operation and communication to support the relationship between school and home (Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019). Valuing the 'cultural wealth' of the community (Yosso, 2005) supports relationship building in the ECCE centre. Increasing parent participation provides teachers the opportunity to also develop an educational approach that is responsive to the cultural setting of the ECCE centre (Chan & Ritchie, 2016).

Figure 2.5 illustrates the Café model which is formed by an approach to parent participation where both parties are empowered as equals to create a flexible and reflective framework for partnership. The development of a parent-teacher partnership model is one that includes collaboration (C) and active participation (A) in a friendly environment (FE) (Kambouri et.al., 2021). Central to the model is a focus on the quality of sharing through open communication and collaboration within a friendly environment (Kambouri et al., 2021). Recognising the unique contributions and experiences parents and families have is central to partnering with the families (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021).
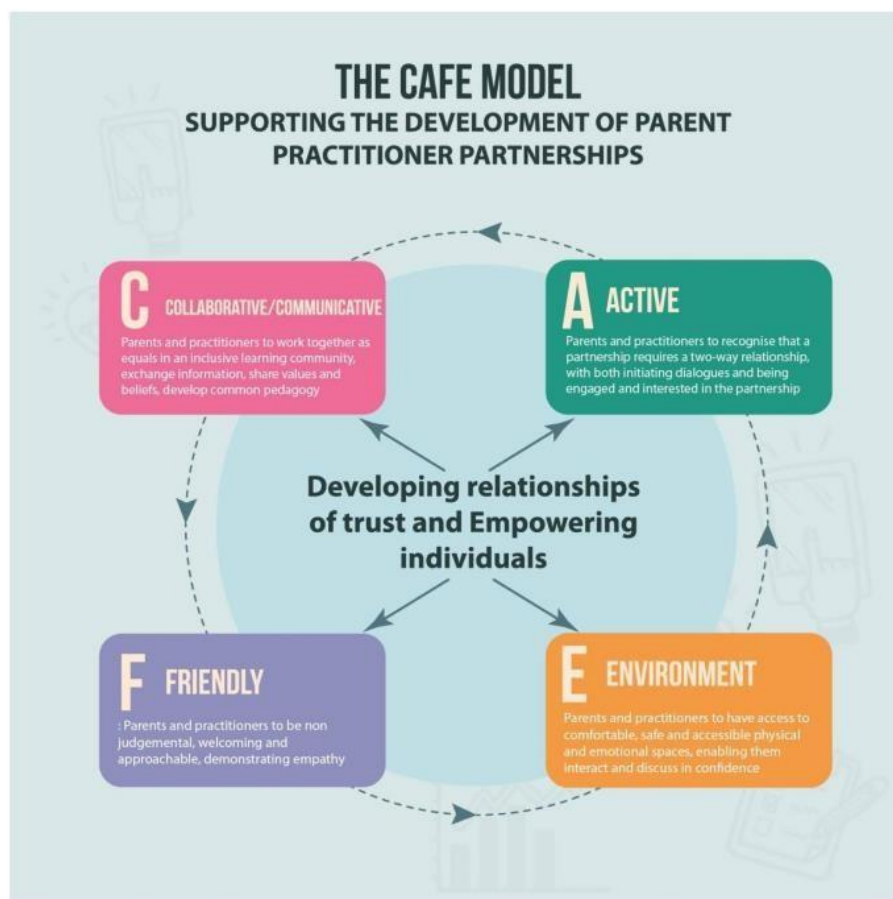
Figure 2-4 The Café Model Source: Kambouri et al. (2021:651)

Building partnership is based on teachers understanding the needs of the families, knowing how to best communicate with the families, addressing potential challenges like time and

money and developing trust with families by ensuring listening is central in the teacher-parent relationship (Kambouri et.al., 2021). Relationship building is important if cooperative and collaborative interactions are to occur with honest open communication (Bipath, 2022).

The expectations with this model are based on the teachers' ensuring parents feel listened to and included (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021; Bettencourt et.al., 2020; Chan & Ritchie, 2016). The intention of the Café model is to be flexible and reflective, viewing parents and teaches as equally empowered to work together (Kambouri et.al., 2021). This model embraces an approach to parent-teacher partnership based on how the setting and teachers encourage participation. Creating partnerships requires a change to how settings have included families moving towards an individual ownership and commitment that is collaborative and reflective (Krijnen et.al., 2022). Challenges within the model include the interpretation of partnership, time, perceptions and experiences of parents and teachers when participating, and what value is placed on the various participatory practices (Kambouri et.al., 2021).

2.3.4. The insights generated by the models.

Generally, models for parent involvement are aimed at middle- and upper-class family norms, where school-based activities are the 'norm' and are not always possible for families in vulnerable communities (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Bettencourt et al., 2020). This is especially true of Epstein's six typologies of parent involvement where more than half of those suggested are school events which low-income families may not be able to attend if they have little control over their work schedule or access to childcare (Keengwe & Onchiwari, 2022; Baxter & Kilderry, 2021; Janssen et.al., 2012). The idea that parents who are not involved are not interested does not consider the lived experiences of those parents and schools believe they need to educate these parents to be more involved (Van Laere et al., 2018).

Keyes' (2002) model of parent participation reflects the complex nature of parent-teacher relationships and interactions. Whilst this is important to consider, it does not necessarily address how schools and parents can collaborate effectively. The model also relies on the school being the initiator and maintainer of parent-teacher interactions.

Kambouri et al. (2021) have emphasised the importance of building a trusting relationship with parents to maintain parent-teacher partnerships that are based on trust. The focus of their model paves the way for collaboration between stakeholders, by requiring the school to be mindful of their approach to parent participation, ensuring they make space for conversations. The challenge here is to guard against viewing parents as unwilling participants in the life of the school. Everyone in the ECCE community needs to be involved in creating a shared vision for sustainable partnership (Krijnen, et.al. 2022).

2.4. Understandings of parent involvement, engagement and participation.

As this research considers the role of parent participation it is important to explore other terms associated with parents and schools. The various terms have been defined in Chapter 1, but there is a need to expand on how exploring potential gaps in understanding parent participation. As discussed in Chapter 1, parent involvement is addressed in various South African ECD policy documents, with a tendency to focus on how to encourage parents to be supportive and share information with settings (Biersteker et al., 2023:7). To move past this superficial approach, we need to better understand and explore the potential approaches and differences between parent involvement, parent engagement, and parent participation.

2.4.1. Parent involvement

Research (Strømme & Helland, 2020; Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019; Oostdam & Hooge, 2013) indicates that children who are doing well at school, both academically and socially, generally have parents who know the value of how their involvement influences their children's educational success.

Epstein defines parent involvement as 'parents assisting at home with learning activities' (1985:19). Boyle et al. (2018:191) describe parental involvement as, 'a partnership process in which all parties contribute for the benefit of the children'. Baxter and Kilderry (2021) describe parent involvement as having school-based interactions with school-led activities that encourage parents to 'help out'.

Involving parents in the educational process is one way to support previously disadvantaged communities become empowered (Boyle et. al., 2018). Getting parents involved creates equality amongst the diverse parent body (Li et.al., 2020). The parents and the centre work together for the benefit of the children. Collins and Fields-Smith (2024:98) assert that parent involvement focuses on a home-school relationship that best supports the school's approach to children's learning. The DBE (South Africa. DBE, 2015) in the Action plan to 2019 describe parent involvement as knowing what takes place in the school, supporting the school with any problems and receiving regular reports. This approach limits parents being part of the school community as the school is seen as the main source of communication and does not actively promote the voice of parents.

2.4.1.1. Involvement is the home-school relationship

Kassen (2021) considers the separation of school and home an old-fashioned idea. The Interim Policy for Childhood Development (South Africa, 1995:12) describes parents as being innately interested in ensuring their children are educated and it is therefore important that there is continuity between home and ECCE where families also feel supported. One way to create this continuity is suggested by Gwele and Ebrahim (2018) as initiating home visits. Home visits allow the ECCE centres to create communication, helping teachers know how to support the individual children and families within their specific contexts. Home visits may be

one way to create a natural collaboration allowing parents and ECCE centres to work towards a common goal (Hancock & Cheatham, 2021:69). Teachers consider the home environment the place where children learn early social and academic skills and knowing the home life of children helps support these skills (Li et.al., 2020). It is equally important to understand the unique dynamics within each home as this can both support and hinder a child's success in the setting (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022). Developing good communication between the centre and home is described as a vital tool for collaboration in decision-making (Hancock & Cheatham, 2021). This level of understanding further supports the development of partnership between the ECCE and home.

2.4.1.2. *Involvement is supporting learning and child success*

When parents are involved in schools, they have a better understanding of what is taking place in the school and how they can support their children. This in turn creates a positive atmosphere in the school where all families feel welcomed (Van Wyk, 2011:200). There is a desire to increase parent involvement in the children's learning by accessing parents existing knowledge to encourage discussions that support practical application to learning strategies. Parents who are involved in the ECCE centre cooperate more willingly with the teachers and learn about the school, the curriculum and how to support their children academically at home (Mokibelo, 2022; Epstein, 1985). When parents are involved in the school, children are absent less often and there is a better attitude towards school and learning. Parent involvement also means teachers are better able to do the academic work they need to do with the children (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022). Parent involvement develops relationships that support positive learning experiences for children, and this has a positive academic outcome (Knoche, 2015). The benefit of encouraging parents to be involved in the ECCE setting will extend to formal school and result in less high school dropouts (Van Wyk, 2011:200). If there is a good quality of parent involvement at preschool, this is also likely to continue into formal schooling which bodes well for children educationally (Li et al., 2020).

2.4.1.3. *Involvement is volunteering and fundraising*

Practical aspects of parent involvement that support the day to day running of schools is often a key component of a school's success (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Epstein, 2019). Parent involvement is at times regarded as being linked to the financial and governance aspects of the school. Meier and Lemmer (2015) address the view that parental involvement is often weak and limited to paying fees and fundraising. Schools rely on parents to pay fees and support them whether they are actively involved or not (Fenton, et.al., 2017). The school identifies parents who can help and then tells them how they can contribute to the life of the school through events like fundraising and volunteering (Collins et.al., 2024; Van Loggenberg Venter et al., 2014). Kurtulmus (2016) identifies dimensions of parent involvement as attending meetings and helping with activities. Although school events are not always valued by parents, it is considered important to encourage parents to attend meetings and be part of informal

discussions within the setting (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Kambouri et.al., 2021). Asking parents to volunteer and support the setting encourages the acquisition of skills and knowledge creating a sense of cultural wealth and inclusion that strengthens the community (Padayachee et.al., 2023; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020).

2.4.1.4. *Challenges of parent involvement*

A key challenge of involving parents in the school is for teachers and parents to find the time and energy to do this (Van Wyk, 2011). In a vulnerable community parents may work in spaces that demand long work hours. Epstein (1992) refers to some families as 'hard to reach' as they need constant encouragement to be involved. This is a deficit view of families without consideration for the challenges the families may face. Practically, this limits how much time parents can be involved in the centre and teachers need to be creative to encourage parent involvement; and this may include involving the extended family. Although parent involvement is seen as beneficial to children's educational success, there is a growing awareness that the practice of parent involvement may reflect Western and middle-class assumptions and does not always take culture and diversity into account (Modise, 2022; Li et.al., 2020; Munje & Mncube, 2018; Motala & Deacon, 2011). How parents get involved reflects their understanding of parent involvement which is often influenced by their own experiences of the education system and how their parents were involved (Keengwe & Onchiwari, 2022; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Boyle et al., 2018; Janssen et.al., 2012). Chan and Ritchie (2016: 291) are disparaging of ECCE centres that narrowly define parent involvement as 'parents following the teachers' protocols for participating in and supporting the activities and routines of the ECCE centre.' Barriers to parent involvement may include limited parent knowledge of schooling, economic limitations and parents feeling unwelcome in the setting (Ahmed, Rönkä , Perälä-Littunen & Eerola 2024:40). The work ECCE centres do with children is improved when parents know the important role they have in their childs learning and development (Nutbrown & Cook, 2023).

2.4.1.5. *Parent Engagement*

Collins and Fields-Smith (2024:98) explored the shift from parent involvement to parent engagement as an attempt to look beyond what parents do for the school to consider what motivates parents to engage in the life of the school as a way of supporting their children.

Fenton et al. (2017) describe parent engagement as parents having an 'active voice on how they take part'. Parental engagement focuses on the expectation that parents help within the ECCE centre and share their ideas, but these ideas may not necessarily be implemented. Being engaged helps develop cultural links between the school and home as part of a community (Collins et.al., 2024; Fenton et.al., 2017). Merriam Webster (2022) defines *engagement* as 'emotional involvement or commitment'. Being emotionally connected to the ECCE setting supports the idea that parents have chosen an ECCE centre they believe will best meet the needs of their children. This is a personal decision that may be based on others' opinions of the environment, or the parents have taken the time to get to know the ECCE

setting. Excell (2016:5) defines *engagement* as 'the ability of all in the group to work towards achieving a common goal and shared ideas of practice'. Parent engagement is also linked to academic success as the relationship between school and home is strengthened (Bettencourt, 2021:3).

2.4.1.5.1. Motivating engagement

There are multiple benefits to quality school-family engagement, the key benefit being the positive impact this has on the children in the ECCE centre (Smith et.al., 2022). The habits from home have a key influence on the ECCE centre and encouraging parents to engage with the setting helps create a sense of community between the home and setting (Li et al, 2020). Engagement between the parents and the setting helps to share common goals and interests whilst working together to help the children achieve success (Modise, 2022). Engagement is the opportunity for parents to become part of the decision-making processes of the setting, and this benefits the children as well (Fenton et.al., 2017). Connections and engagement with families helps understand approaches to discipline, play-based learning and any language barriers using this information to build trust and connection with the families (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022).

2.4.1.5.2. Engagement for cultural connection

Making use of genuine, open communication helps parents self-direct how they engage with centre activities to initiate interactions (Fenton et al., 2017). When the teachers make use of activities like home visits, parents feel supported and are more likely to engage with the setting as they feel supported (Gwele & Ebrahim, 2018). This approach provides parents the opportunity to include strengthen their social and cultural capital within the setting. Viewing the family as part of the ECCE community is supported with the concept of ubuntu where all are valued as contributing and connecting with each other and not viewed as individuals within the setting (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022). Teachers are sensitive to the cultural norms and values of the families and are open to engaging in conversations to understand instead of imposing their own ideas (Fenton et.al., 2017). Teachers also need to be aware of cultures and traditions that may keep parents from engaging with the school community (Mokibelo, 2022).

2.4.1.5.3. Engagement as idea sharing

Parents are included in creating spaces within the setting through self-directed and created activities (Fenton et.al., 2017). Parents are valued as a resource within the ECCE setting and there is a proactive approach to including them (Ebrahim et al., 2023:115). Sharing their ideas is akin to sharing power as all ideas are valued and supported as parents structure how they will be part of the setting. Beneficial bilateral communication provides the opportunity for trust to be created through supportive relationships that considers those in the community an asset to the ECCE setting (Henry & Giese, 2023:19). Engagement that encourages idea sharing supports the children as parents and teachers make decisions together building on unique

strengths for collaboration (Modise, 2022; Knoche et.al., 2015). When the ECCE centre creates a collaborative and engaging environment for the families, it enhances the quality of the education as parents see the importance of preschool for their children's academic success which will help them strive for a better future (Ahmed et.al., 2024; Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019).

2.4.1.5.4. Engagement for academic success

The voices of the parents need to be incorporated as this is one of the settings' greatest resources when it comes to educating the children (Fenton et.al., 2017). Parent engagement is linked to building a relationship between the parents and the school to support children academically through shared responsibility (Bettencourt et al., 2020). Encouraging parents to engage in the educational life of the child has a positive impact on school performance (Oostdam & Hooge, 2012). The role of parent engagement needs to be valued in the children's learning as it benefits the children (Nutbrown, 1999). Potential biases that may exist towards parents and children from low SES communities also need to be considered (Fenton et. al, 2017). An inclusive approach to parent engagement means there is a shared responsibility to support the children (Krijnen et al., 2022). Encouraging parents to engage in school and classroom activities, through observation and asking for their opinions on how to support the children academically helps the teachers understand the challenges children may face in their daily lives (Fenton et.al., 2017).

2.4.1.5.5. Challenges and assumptions of engagement

To increase parent engagement, it is a good idea that the setting learns from and cooperates with the family and the community (Fenton et.al., 2017). It is important to ensure that assumptions are not made as to why low-income families do not participate and engage with the school. Smith et.al. (2022) focus on the importance of encouraging family engagement, especially in families in low SES areas that may connect less frequently as one way to foster and nurture the children. Teachers need to be aware of the challenges that exist for families to be completely engaged (Modise, 2022). Challenges include access to resources, opportunities for dialogue, parental priorities and powerlessness (Ebrahim et.al., 2021; Biersteker et.al., 2023). Consideration also needs to be given to the structure of families as this also impacts family engagement. Single parent families are diverse with many characteristics and teachers need to know how they can encourage parent engagement when time and limited support may impact engagement (Fenton et.al., 2017; Epstein, 1985). The approach families and teachers have towards engagement has consequences for the extent to which they will participate in decision-making and the life of the ECCE centre (Hancock & Cheatham, 2021).

2.4.1.6. *Exploring parent participation*

Literature searches for 'parental participation' yielded results considering parent engagement and parent involvement. Cox-Petersen (2011:5) explored the concept of parent participation

and suggests that it is when groups work towards a common goal. In New Zealand *Te Whāriki* features parent participation as being connected and belonging as an empowered community (Chan & Ritchie 2016:292). Parents and teachers can work effectively in partnership when there is a cooperative relationship based on equality, support and mutual respect (Jevtić, 2023). Kambouri et.al. (2021) describe partnership as parents and teachers working together for the best interests of the children whilst maintaining boundaries, roles, and equity of power. Having parents participate must involve an awareness of individual pedagogical approach of the ECCE setting which should respond appropriately towards a potentially diverse parent body. Encouraging parents to actively participate in the setting supports an interplay of the educational approach of the setting and the approach of the community (Erlina et al., 2024:53). Cultural diversity should be acknowledged and valued by the ECCE centre to benefit from all stakeholders participating to strengthen teaching and learning (Van As et al., 2021). Centres that value the diversity and uniqueness of each family encourage parents in vulnerable communities to view the ECCE centre as a resource that supports them in their parenting (Daries, 2021). The centre can be sensitive to the beliefs parents may have regarding their right to participate in the life of their child at school. For true parent participation it is vital to know who holds the power within the ECCE setting to establish trust and open dialogue (Cox-Petersen, 2011:190).

2.4.1.6.1. Participation and power

Kambouri et al. (2021) refer to the power dynamics in parent-teacher partnerships as being one element that has an impact on important partnership. The power in the parent-teacher relationship influences the relationship, especially when supporting children and improving the school community (Uitto et.al., 2021). Keengwe and Onchiwari (2022) also address the importance of the power relationship between parents and teachers as one way to ensure advocacy and empowerment of families is encouraged. There is evidence that a parent's socio-economic levels may influence their belief in how they can participate in a meaningful way (Strømme & Helland, 2020). ECCE centres in Lavender Hill have the potential to encourage parent participation, thereby narrowing the socio-economic gaps within the community by placing greater value on improving parents' own attitudes towards education and how their participation in the ECCE setting can benefit the children. The teachers must be aware of how their power functions within the setting; and they can either entrench or disrupt the experiences parents have by employing a humanising pedagogy with a balance of power (Keet et al., 2009). This idea is supported by Boyle et al. (2018:187) who make links between encouraging participation of parents to tackle educational disadvantages. Encouraging parent participation relies on relationships being at the core of the ECCE centre. The children observe how their parents are approached by the principal and the teachers and this needs to align with the community values where individual agency is supported, as children absorb the values of the adults around them (Van Krieken Robson, 2019). This approach also shifts the old-fashioned idea of school being separate from home with little communication and collaboration

(Kassen, 2021:35). Acknowledging parents as partners in the ECCE centre will ultimately benefit the children and the centre (Kassen, 2021:38).

2.4.1.6.2. Participation for family connection

Parental participation allows the teachers to better understand each of the families in the classroom, knowing where to support each child to achieve their potential. Epstein (1992:17) expounds on the importance of establishing connections between school and home and states: 'the quality of early partnerships establishes patterns and relationships that encourage or discourage parents … to communicate with teachers in later years.' These partnerships improve the relationship between school and home and has the potential to influence the broader community as well (Jevtić, 2023; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Cox-Petersen, 2011). Two-way dialogue is vital to parent participation. It gives the parents and the teachers agency to create a supportive pro-active community. Parent participation is a democratic process and teachers and principals view parents as equal partners in the life of the ECCE centre. Partnerships are beneficial to all the parties involved as it is not about one group dominating another group (Cox-Petersen, 2011:5).

2.4.1.6.3. Participation for understanding and belonging

Formosinho and Passos (2019) acknowledge that parental participation is a process that takes time to develop as schools encourage parents to develop a sense of understanding of all aspects of the school and how they can be involved. They further discuss the importance of encouraging participation as it 'creates a feeling of belonging and motivates more participation' (2019:313). The ECCE centre and the families rely on each other working towards common goals for child wellbeing (Jevtić, 2023). In vulnerable communities like Lavender Hill parents may believe they offer no value to the ECCE setting as they may not have completed their own schooling. Developing a partnership with parents helps them participate both at home and in the setting by encouraging and supporting communication for understanding (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013). Employing parent participation supports the concept of ubuntu where all collectively participate to support the children through democratic processes (Jacobs & Daniels, 2022). Encouraging and supporting parent participation then relies on the ECCE setting to build relationships with each family through practicing home visits, being nonjudgemental towards families and role modelling open, clear communication.

Krijnen et al. (2022:265) suggest that parent participation includes:

a)   shared responsibility for how children in the ECCE setting are developing,
b)   a shared vision of the ECCE setting held equally by the parents and the school,
c)   collaboration between the parents and the ECCE setting where everyone is included.

If ECCE centres create opportunities for open dialogue that is non-judgemental, it is possible for meaningful parent participation to occur. This process may take time as teachers and

centres shift their existing paradigm from an authoritarian approach to a democratic approach to all the stakeholders.

2.4.1.6.4. Parent participation and democracy

The Department of Education (South Africa, 2001) describes learning in Early Childhood Development as one way to promote democracy and ubuntu. Ubuntu is mentioned as a core value of participation as it creates an interconnectedness and interdependence through shared values (Venter et al., 2024; Jacobs & Daniels, 2022). Providing the opportunity to create connection and collaboration requires ECCE centres to think about leadership roles and the impact these may have on developing common goals, as there may be a sense of fear, distrust and wariness which will impact a truly democratic approach to parent partnerships (Jevtić, 2023). Providing a sense of equity and social justice requires maximum family participation in the setting making use of inclusive pedagogical practices (Archer, 2024). This can happen by creating links between the families and the setting with knowledge of the contextual realities to support a humanising pedagogy encouraging voice and agency as a key characteristic (Zinn & Rodgers, 2012). A democratic approach can be mandated but implementation can be a challenge and awareness of the experiences of the teachers and the parents needs to be contemplated (Irwin, 2012). Parents want to shape their own experiences to achieve a greater sense of self by being included in the setting (Latecka, 2023; del Carmen Salazar, 2013).

2.4.1.6.5. Challenges with parent participation.

The idea that active parent participation is encouraged in the setting does not mean that every parent participates (Jevtic, 2023). When exploring the challenges that may occur having parents participate, the idea that parents do not feel they have anything meaningful to contribute appears to be a potential barrier (Biersteker et.al., 2023; Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Mokibelo (2022) also mentions parents' own lack of education and illiteracy as a limitation to how they believe they can contribute to the ECCE centre. COVID-19 may have also impacted parent participation as they were stressed and felt isolated (Mudick, 2022; Keengwe & Onchiwari, 2022). How the teachers position themselves with the parents, viewing them as either supportive or challenging, may also limit how a parent-teacher partnership is encouraged (Uitto et.al., 2021).

2.4.1.7. Parents perceptions of involvement and engagement

As presented, studies on parent involvement and engagement present the teacher and school with perception and understanding. A democratic approach to the subject of parent involvement requires an exploration into an understanding of how parents perceive their own involvement and participation in the life of the school.

Generally, parents appear to have a sense of responsibility towards being involved in aspects of their child's school life. This includes attending meetings, helping with homework and making sure their children are on time for school, but does not include participating in classroom activities (Gross et.al., 2019; Kurtulmus, 2016).

Barriers parents face to being involved and engaged include lack of family support, daily pressures and lack of finances and of clarity or guidance on involvement (Gross et.al., 2019; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Kurtulmus, 2016). Stormont et al. (2024) refer to the stigma parents feel if their child is struggling at school as they are labelled 'bad parents' and feel judged.

Parents' own experiences of school and levels of academic success may also play a role in how they perceive their ability to be involved in their child's school life. Ahmed et.al. (2024) include limited knowledge of schooling, financial struggles and hesitancy as barriers to parent involvement. Parents may also feel unwelcome even when the school has invited them in. Schools decide how parents can be involved and tend to only encourage involvement based on what works for the school (Krijnen et.al., 2022). Schools may also not be forthcoming in initiating or encouraging parents to be involved and engaged and this needs to be encouraged to support the success of the children and the school within the community (Munje & Mncube, 2018).

2.4.1.8. *Evidence that supports and challenges parent involvement.*

Parent involvement is often associated with children having a more positive experience of school (Charamba & Aloka, 2024). Involvement is seen to support the school to be successful for the benefit of the children. If there is a home-school link there is continuity for the children, and this helps the schoolwork effectively (Kurtulmus 2016). Children who are supported with their academic work at home are better prepared for the school day. The school feels respected and better supported by parents if the children are on time and ready for the school day (Pope, et al., 2024: 173). In turn this builds trust and confidence between parents and the school (Ahmed et al., 2024).

As parent involvement in ECCE is associated with supporting the settings financially there may be a concerted effort to encourage parents to be involved that has limited reference to the benefits for children (Hall, et al., 2024). Most parents in a school do not get involved and engage due to time pressures and this does not necessarily impact the running of the school, even though teachers perceive this as a negative consequence. It is important to consider parent involvement in relation to where the power lies within the school and how this impacts the culture and relationships (Shaik, 2024).

No clear evidence that children are academically stronger if parents know what they are learning at school (Hall, et al., 2024). Parents have a sense of responsibility towards supporting the school and this often puts pressure on the parents as schools sit in judgement of those families who don't have the time (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018).

2.4.2. Practical experiences for parent participation.

How parents are directly involved in the ECCE centre depends on whether they know what activities are on and where they can be of help (Boyle et.al., 2018). Parent involvement is often set by the school and reflects a set of codes and levels of authority (Li et al., 2020:344). The

implication is that parents may not always feel included, and it is important to consider whether parents know that their participation in the ECCE centre their child attends is valuable.

Okeke (2014) cites the importance of involving parents to ensure future educational success. ECCE centres need to create a collaborative relationship with the parents to empower and inspire the parents to be active participants (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:167). When parents are actively involved in the ECCE centre and share their time and skills the centre benefits positively, this impacts the children as well. It is noted that when parents are involved in their child's school there tends to be strong links to a stable and supportive home environment (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013). This involvement needs to be understood within the specific context of the setting, especially if educational disadvantages are to be tackled meaningfully (Boyle et al., 2018:187).

In vulnerable communities like Lavender Hill, it is worth considering what practical approaches ECCE centres can institute to encourage parent engagement. This will help bridge the gap between the centre and home (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:174). Offering practical support and resources to families within the community has the potential to improve communication whilst making the parents feel welcome in the ECCE and hopefully encourage more voluntary participation within the ECCE. Parents need to be included in the centre as this is a critical time in the developmental lives of children (Twala, 2021:7). Centres that include parents as valuable stakeholders have the potential to build a strong community that feels empowered to support children through their academic life. Participation is an active role and recognises the value parents offer the setting, providing a level of social justice (Latecka, 2023).

If parents in Lavender Hill do not feel personally empowered to contribute to the community, it is possible that being encouraged to actively participate in the ECCE centre their child attends will result in the ripple effect of giving parents a voice within wider community. As discussed, encouraging democratic dialogue through sharing ideas and being open to listening without judgement is a paradigm shift that has a positive effect on the whole community as they feel valued for their personal contribution. Boyle, et al. (2018:191) state that '… this partnership process in which all parties contribute will benefit the children.'

The approach parents have towards the school is influenced in part by their own level of education, their socio-cultural background and their level of income (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013:344). This unconscious influence on parents believing they have a right to participate in the life of the ECCE centre in a meaningful way is also endorsed by how the principal and teachers allow the parents to participate. Teachers and principals in ECCE centres should be aware of the potential power dynamics between themselves and the parents who believe they lack the knowledge and skills to contribute meaningfully and do not have the right to critically challenge viewpoints (Krijnen et al., 2022:292).

Bettencourt et al. (2020:4) are concerned about the unconscious bias schools may have regarding parent involvement. This bias occurs if parents are perceived as not being involved in the school, with little awareness of the challenges parents may face. To support parents getting involved, an understanding of their own experiences of school is required as these may not have been positive; as well as finding out from parents how they support their children at home (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Bettencourt et.al., 2020:4). To encourage parent participation, schools should develop strong lines of communication that encourage relationship building.

2.4.3. Policies and procedures to support parent participation

In Chapter 1 a review of policy documents on ECCE in South Africa that provide evidence of the value of ECCE centres being at the heart of supporting families in every community. Hornby and Blackwell (2018:117) discuss potential barriers to parent participation being the gap between policy and practice, with little clarity on how to implement parent participation. Ebrahim (2014) emphasises the importance of policy development that is focused and responds to locally relevant approaches to child development. The Organisation for Economic Co-operations and Developments (OECD) working paper No. 251 (Kral et.al., 2021) discusses the importance of providing investment in the early years to support the healthy development of families and children to ensure economic success for future generations. This support allows parents to be financially active, knowing that the care of their children in ECCE settings is protected and valued by policies. In South Africa these policies include: The Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (South Africa, 1995); The South African Schools Act (South Africa. DoE, 1996); Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education (South Africa, 2001); The Children's Act (South Africa, 2005); and the South Africa National Early Learning and Development Standards for Children Birth to Four Years (South Africa, 2009). The policy documents focus on the best interests of the child as it is built into the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South Africa, 1996); however, there is no specific inclusion of the role of parents and families (South Africa, 2013:7). Biersteker et al. (2023:2) acknowledge that government appears to have prioritised Early Childhood Development, creating various policies to reduce future inequalities. However, there are gaps when it comes to implementation including poor infrastructure, access to resources and poor attendance at ECD programmes. Ebrahim (2023) expresses concern about the provision of ECD as it is largely driven by an informal sector and NGOs, which impacts the ability, or need, to adhere to policy documents within settings. The rights of children are protected, and families are encouraged to support the ECCE centres as part of the community (South Africa, 2005). In line with supporting parent participation there needs to be a connection between policy and implementation into ECCE centres and parents lived realities. Awareness of the challenges families face provides an opportunity to democratise the links between policy and what happens in practice (Torres, 2014; Irwin, 2012; Freire, 1998). Providing policy frameworks also create the opportunity to ensure quality teaching and learning occurs (Excell, 2016).

2.4.4.   The value placed on parent participation.

2.4.4.1. *ECCE centre approach to parental participation*

In ECCE centres parents need to be encouraged to have a voice in the life of the ECCE centre their child is at (Archer, 2024; Latecka, 2023; Munje & Mncube, 2018). In research done in South Africa by Segoe and Bisschoff (2019) they determined that parents were not involved in their children's schools and that teachers' perceptions of this lack of involvement was due to limited insights and understanding of the importance of being involved. COVID-19 intensified the importance of a partnership between parents and teachers as parents became the main educators relying on the teachers for support and input (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022). The suggestion for parent participation includes developing programmes that teach the parents how to be involved on a continuous basis. To create equal partnerships between the centre and home, it is essential to consider the voice of the teachers, not just the parents and the ECCE centres management teams. 'Schools and teachers are considered to be in a key position when it comes to furthering parental involvement' (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013). Doing this effectively includes encouraging open and clear communication between school and home. Teachers do want parents to be involved as they know that a partnership between ECCE centres and home is beneficial to the children in the classroom (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:166).

Teachers are fundamental to building relationships with parents in vulnerable communities by having supportive strategies in place (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021; Fenton et al., 2017). The challenge is ensuring that the families in the ECCE centres do not feel marginalised due to their economic status and that teachers 'include parents as they fight barriers to growth in the education system' (Fenton et al., 2017:215). In vulnerable communities there is a strong focus on basic needs and connecting with centres and children may not be considered a priority by parents. Ashley-Cooper (2021) encourages centres to value the small window of opportunity they have to be a positive influence on families and children before they enter formal schooling. This can occur by involving families in the centre without prejudice. The key feature of a parent-teacher partnership is valuing the perceptions and experiences of the parents and teachers (Kambouri et.al., 2021)

 Teachers should be aware of how their own education levels and family values may differ from those of the families of the children in the ECCE centre. The intention is to limit the 'us' and 'them' approach and see parents as competent participants (Moss, 2011). This awareness supports the development of partnerships between parents and teachers by acknowledging varying points of view and withholding potential biases (Krijnen et.al., 2022; Fenton et al., 2017). Historically, the apartheid system created and maintained "separate and unequal childhoods." (Ebrahim, 2014:69). Knowing that parents don't expect to be involved, based on personal experiences, will impact relationship and community building as ECCE centres need to have close relationships with families (Mokibelo, 2022). If parents and teachers grew up as

children who experienced this as their reality, there needs to be a paradigm shift to empower parents to participate meaningfully in ECCE to enhance social inclusion and strengthen children's success.

In many parts of South Africa, within vulnerable communities and in Lavender Hill, historically children were cared for within the community by 'day-mothers'. Harrison and Madingoaneng (2022:463) explain this home-based approach as children being cared for by 'aunties' who saw an opportunity to earn an income. As ECCE centres opened, children were cared for by people with some form of qualification. If parents have no experience of this, there is the potential for them to feel they have no voice, as the qualified adult in the ECCE centre is considered more knowledgeable than them. ECCE centres must be aware of 'deficit' approach towards parent's knowledge and experiences (Krijnen, 2022: 263). This leads to the school believing they need to transfer knowledge to parents. There is the possibility of conversations being one-sided as parents are not aware of the knowledge they have of their own child.

ECCE centres that encourage parents to be part of the decision-making processes provide a supportive environment that builds relationships and positive contributions to the centre's community (Modise, 2022; Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019). These opportunities can happen when ECCE centres share information and develop support structures amongst the parents (Atmore, 2016:133). These support structures have the potential to develop the community as parents' support each other in the parenting journey.

2.4.4.2. *Parental understanding of participation in ECCE.*

Approaching how parents get involved and participate, I contemplated whether parents know they have a democratic right to participate in the educational life of their child. It is also pertinent to consider parent perceptions on the value of their participation in the ECCE centre.

It is possible that parents do not know what their role is, or how to be involved as their own parents were not involved and therefore, they do not have a role model of parent participation (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:166). ECCE centres can create supportive connections between themselves and home, so parents better understand the role they play in their children's education. If this process of interconnection between the centre and home starts at an ECCE level, it may continue throughout the children's schooling, which has the potential to ensure academic and social success as well as creating communities strongly invested in relationship building (Modise, 2022; Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019).

Research conducted by Van Laere et.al. (2018) revealed that parents in low socio-economic settings are often not aware of their right to question classroom practice or 'the system' to better understand it. They refer to this as 'silencing' parents (Van Laere et.al., 2018:194). When parents do want to find out more or get involved, they are often made to feel inadequate by teachers. In vulnerable communities' parents may not want to be considered a nuisance, and this shifts the power of how parents to get involved into the hands of the school or the teacher

(Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Bettencourt, 2020). Kurtulmus (2016) believes parents who are encouraged to participate in ECCE are likely to have a sense of responsibility towards formal schooling.

In their study on hindrances to parent involvement, Munje and Mncube (2018:81) espoused that schools are not always clear on how parents should be involved and describe 'parental antipathy' as a stumbling block as parents face social challenges. ECCE centres should create ways for parents to participate meaningfully as this can transform the community within and surrounding the ECCE centre. They suggest that teachers need to value the role they have and feel empowered to find ways to involve parents in the setting (Munje & Mncube, 2018:89).

2.4.4.3. Families and democratic dialogue to support parent participation.

As discussed earlier, South Africa has several policies that encourage parents to be part of the life of the ECCE setting. Due to the authoritarian nature of dialogue in South Africa, it is possible that communication is a one-way process, where the centre communicates its needs and expectations to the parents but does not necessarily have the time or inclination to hear the voices of the parents (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022; Modise, 2022; Munje &Mncube, 2018). Creating change requires all the stakeholders in the ECCE setting to practice new ways of operating. This includes looking for opportunities that support a dialogical approach, instead of focusing on potential obstacles (Freire, 2017).

Developing strong, open and honest communication is a way to encourage parent participation. The ECCE centre should consider how they communicate information to families in a way that supports educational practices. ECCE setting can create opportunities for reciprocal dialogue that helps support the growth of equal partnerships (Van Laere et.al., 2018:197). Teachers don't always know about personal family situations which may create apathy on the part of the parents to participate in the setting (Munje & Mncube, 2018). The intention is to develop "mutual assistance" (Freire, 2017:12) that involves the families in the creation and understanding of the educational policies within the centre. This approach acknowledges the knowledge and skills parents/primary caregivers have as the initial and natural educators of the children, with the teachers being the professional educators (Freire, 2017:16). Combining these two sources of knowledge through dialogue develops mutual trust and a partnership in the education of the children in the ECCE centre. This also supports a democratic approach to working with families where the teachers are open to wanting to know more about the family. It is important to know the community the children come from as well as understand the world of the family without judgement (Freire 2017:19).

ECCE centres are challenged to consider creating spaces that allow for a renewed approach that supports each stakeholder being equal participants (Freire, 2005). Freire is of the opinion that doing this changes the 'banking' approach to education and reduces passivity on the part of the stakeholders (2005:73). Developing a democratic approach allows for change by being

adaptable and flexible to the circumstances and contexts one is in (Dewey, 1916:109). It also creates a connection between the stakeholders, thereby creating the opportunity for growth through nurturing democratic conversations (1916:14). If ECCE centres employ open dialogue to build democracy, this in turn supports the parents and teachers to develop shared ideas and practices that are beneficial for the children in the ECCE.

2.5.   Identifying Gaps in Literature

With the onset of COVID-19, the need for parents and teachers to collaborate and support each other became a vital tool to maintaining a sense of the need for children to be part of an ECCE centre. Literature on this topic is emerging and provides insight into the roles of parents and teachers as co-creators of learning opportunities for children.

There is still limited literature on how ECCE centres and teachers can provide the space to include parents through active participation in the centres. Generally, literature focuses on the value of parent participation as being valuable to the academic life of the children. It is very centre or teacher led, with teachers suggesting how parents can contribute to the needs of the setting, with little emphasis on the settings supporting parents in the community.

This may be an ongoing challenge as parents, especially in low SES environments, have personal and social concerns and challenges that may detract from their ability to be part of the ECCE centre. Providing a democratic and cohesive community of practice within the ECCE centre requires all stakeholders to reflect on their own roles and experiences and reconsider how they can approach each other as competent, capable, and wanting the best for the children in the setting.

2.6.   Chapter Summary

The literature review has emphasised the value and importance of parents being involved and participating in the ECCE centre their child attends. This participation has a meaningful impact on the educational experiences the children have. Parent involvement and parent engagement are valuable components of an ECCE centre; however, they tend to be led and managed by teachers who decide how parents are invited in. Parent participation supports a democratic approach where the voices of all the stakeholders are valued and required. This participation can also establish cohesion within the community of the ECCE setting which has a ripple effect as it includes the wider community. To ensure effective participation by all parents within ECCE centres, the theoretical framework focuses on an exploration of concepts that support the development of parent participation for democratic social cohesion.

To address a potential imbalance of power within ECCE settings it is critical to consider a South African model that supports parent participation based on the personal and social circumstances of each family. This can occur through teachers in the ECCE setting taking the time to learn about the families offering support and care as needed whilst encouraging them to contribute to the life of the centre on a regular basis. The intention is to develop a model

using a democratic approach to the school-family partnership. The inclusion of the parents' voices is one way of developing social cohesion with democratic dialogue creating equality within the ECCE setting. Decisions within the setting are based on the daily practices and lived experiences of the families by breaking down barriers and stereo types through bilateral, open and supportive communication.

Understanding how parent involvement, parent engagement and parent participation differ helps answer research question 1. Parents are expected to be involved as this supports children academically whilst encouraging links between the ECCE setting and home. Parent engagement is the opportunity to build connections through sharing ideas, having a good understanding of the culture of the setting and the home. Parent participation is aimed at developing a sense of belonging within the ECCE setting, where understanding and social cohesion occur through relationship building to build a cohesive community.

How parents can be actively involved within the ECCE setting is addressed in research question 2. ECCE settings are encouraged to create opportunities for hands on involvement, engagement and participation by the parents. This needs to be seen as more than fundraising and should include offering support within the community of the ECCE centre through open communication that address potential needs and offers a sense of empowerment where all experiences and knowledge are valued.

Setting policy that responds to the inclusion of parents has been discussed in chapter 1 which addresses research question 3. Policy has the potential to offer broad brushstrokes which at times do not appear to directly upfront the need for the voice of the parents as contributors in the ECCE setting.

Research question 4 considers the value placed on parent participation. Creating opportunities for dialogue between the ECCE setting and the parents needs to be developed, with teachers being the instigators of two-way communication. Parents feel included and part of the setting if teachers and principals set the tone and make parents know they are valued and appreciated for the contributions and support they can offer the setting.

The intention of parent involvement is to ensure the children are well supported at home with the academic aspects of school life. This helps the school ensure they are successful. Aim to connect with the parents to ensure they are aware of the needs of the school, and how to support their child within the school setting. The purpose of parent involvement is to ensure education is valued by the family, ensuring children stay at school, even though they do not have a voice in decisions that are made for the children.

Engaging with parents shifts the focus away from purely academic success towards parents being encouraged to contribute their personal time to the life of the school. Parents are encouraged to connect with teachers offering to help within the school and be of service to

support the school and the children. This is a shift from being involved in that parents are given a voice; however, the school still holds the power when it comes to making the final decisions.

Encouraging parents to participate in the school is based on giving parents an opportunity to have a voice within the day to day running of the school. This is closely linked to parent engagement, as the cultural capital of the parent body, individually and collectively is valued as contributing to the life of the school. Parent participation includes involving and engaging with the parents, sharing ideas and working together with the best interests of the children, the school and the community at its core.

Parent involvement could be deemed a starting point that schools start with to encourage deeper involvement towards being engaged in the life of the school. Parent then feel supported and included in aspects of their child's life at school. Parents who are involved and engaged are then more likely to become democratic participants within the school as they know their ideas and experiences are valued.

Chapter 3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1.   Introduction

My personal experience in the South African ECCE environment has confirmed the need to consider providing opportunities for personal agency of all stakeholders in the space, without fear of losing power or being viewed as irrelevant. I explored Freire's (1998, 2005) approach to humanist dialogue which is based in democracy through dialogue and supports every voice in the development of meaningful participation and communities that share common ideas (Freire, 2005). Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2010) supports the democratic inclusion of the voices of all stakeholders as part of a democratic process, which explores the value of individual agency to create change. It is then possible to create spaces for pedagogy-inpartication, espoused by Formosinho and Formosinho (2012) to support the concept of providing individual agency for all the stakeholders which actively creates understanding and involvement in the ECCE centre.

The theoretical framework lays the foundation for the creation of the conceptual framework to support the development of a co-constructed model of parent participation. The conceptual framework employs the approaches of democracy through communication (Freire, 2005) that builds an inclusive community (Bangura, 2005) that shares personal knowledge (Wenger, 2002) to co-construct community environments (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). I will employ the theoretical and conceptual frameworks to co-create a model of parent participation in an ECCE centre using an agentic and democratic approach. The model of parent participation brings the voice of all stakeholders in the ECCE setting into the co-creation of a bespoke parent model, which includes time to reflect on its efficacy through ongoing collaboration and discussions.

The theorists (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012; Wenger, 2005; Freire, 2005) all make use of the terminology 'school'. In the interests of reflecting these theories, I have maintained this terminology in this chapter, to avoid confusion.

3.2.   Freire's Humanising Pedagogy for Parent Participation

Freire (2005) describes humanisation as 'the process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communication, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world' (del Carmen Salazar, 2013:126). Historically, in South Africa, there has been an 'unequal' approach to education where power resides with a few due to exclusive practices as part of a society which leans towards an authoritarian perspective (Ebrahim, 2010). This occurred during apartheid where challenging those in authority was discouraged and dehumanisation was part of the fabric of educational settings (Zinn & Rodgers, 2012). Freire (1998) expounds at length on the connections between education and the political agenda of those in leadership within a country. Latecka (2023) suggests the vestiges of the Apartheid

past may still occupy educational settings where power resides in the authority of those running the educational setting.

The onset of democracy in 1994, through the newly formulated Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South Africa, 1996), encouraged partnerships in education (Van Wyk, 2011:202). All stakeholders, parents, teachers, children and community members were expected to play a part in the life of the schools. Dewey (1916) expounds on the virtue of democracy as including shared decision-making that occurs through communication. For effective democracy there is a requirement for all people to be aware of the value of their personal contribution by participating and communicating together in the construction of a different approach to the world (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Sharing common knowledge and values occurs through communication and constructs social interactions, whilst also challenging the notion that poor communities feel isolated (Noddings, 2016). If one assumes teachers and parents had an authoritarian experience in school, we need to explore how this has affected their outlook as adults. Freire (1998) ascribes authoritarianism to those in power appearing more knowledgeable than others. Authoritarianism creates a power imbalance and a move towards a democratic and inclusive approach would hopefully create a balance of power between the setting and the parents. In an ECCE setting it is possible that parents from vulnerable communities may believe they have no right to share their thoughts and ideas as they are not knowledgeable. Employing a democratic and humanising pedagogy has the potential to create a new approach to both the structure and social aspects of settings (Latecka, 2023).

An authoritarian approach may appear elitist and paternalistic as those in positions of power are considered more knowledgeable (Freire 1998: xvii). The challenge is to move away from a fear based authoritarian approach towards a democratic approach that values the voice of all stakeholders in the setting. The balance between being permissive and controlling needs to be found in a democratic approach through open communication and community building. Educational settings are well positioned to allow open dialogue where everyone has a voice and is given agency. Those in positions of leadership learn to listen and hear what is being said (Freire, 1998:65). How we respond to those in positions of authority relates to our experiences of the world as an individual, an educator and learner, this is part of our identity (Freire, 1998:70). To strengthen democracy, it is important to encourage community participation, allowing the community to give a voice to their own desires. Watson and Ryan (2014:77) discuss strengthening democracy by employing Freire's (1998) approach to education which transforms individuals and the broader community. This has a ripple effect as it spreads to the surrounding environments. Everyone in the community is empowered to express themselves and build the community.

3.2.1. Humanistic Dialogue

To improve and promote parent participation it is worth exploring and understanding the opportunities parents are given to engage in dialogue with the school. When parents are encouraged into conversations, they then know more about the ECCE setting and are better able to strengthen the links between the setting and home (Charamba & Aloka, 2024:109). Freire (2005:89) states that dialogue is 'an act of creation; it must not serve as … the domination of one person by another'. A humanising pedagogy values dialogue as one approach to building relationships and limiting the manipulation of a group of people (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Dialogue is the opportunity to give power to people's words which has the potential to create transformation within the community. Employing a democratic approach through communication allows for interaction and collaboration that values different experiences and opinions (Orberg et al., 2024:2). If parents are supported in participating meaningfully within the ECCE environment, it is important to develop a platform that creates dialogue between the school and the community. Restoring voice and personal agency is considered by Zinn and Rodgers (2012:77) a key characteristic of a humanising pedagogy. del Carmen Salazar (2013) expands the concept of a humanistic approach by suggesting it allows individuals to create change and transform their social world as they are empowered to participate meaningfully within it.

Embracing a dialogic approach towards those in the school community provides the opportunity to avoid oppression of any one group. How communication occurs impacts everyone within the community and it is important to be aware of the power dynamics that occur in conversational transactions (Keet et.al., 2009). The individuals within specific contexts use dialogical exchanges and self-expression to act and create social change (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Engaging in communication with all in the setting encourages all to contribute their voice to aspects that are being discussed to create meaningful change through debate and critical thinking (López, 2023).

3.2.2. Ubuntu and Humanistic Dialogue

The African concept of 'Ubuntu' (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013) supports an approach to open communication where all individuals are encouraged to participate in collaboration to avoid oppression of voice. Ubuntu 'rests upon dialogue, with its particularity, individuality and historicality' (Bangura, 2005:32). The three pillars of ubuntu are clarified by Mugumbate and Chereni (2019:29) as having regard for others, regard for self and regard for the environment with the individual not being more important than the community. Having responsibility towards the community can support individual identity, humanness and self-worth (Mayaka & Truell, 2021:651). del Carmen Salazar (2013:129) theorises that if we deny someone their humanness, we also deny our own. There are close links between this and a humanising pedagogy that is person-centred, providing the opportunity for individual engagement, whilst building a social community (Latecka, 2023). People want to create and develop their own

experiences in unity with those around them (del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Keet et.al., 2009). To encourage this, it is essential to consider the diverse experiences of the individuals within a community as past experiences impact expectations and planning for social and community change in the future (Keet et.al., 2009). When people are expected to be passive and submit to a greater power, there is little chance of transforming society. Dewey (2001) proposes that when people are connected, they cannot function in a space without taking each other into consideration. Ubuntu is strengthened through dialogue as people are open and express their ideas and share experiences to both learn from each other and build relationship (Shaik, 2024:16). Authentic ubuntu incorporates dialogue allowing people to maintain their individuality whilst being treated respectfully (Bangura, 2005:34). Encouraging meaningful dialogue within the ECCE setting creates the opportunity to learn from each other and develop a strong sense of community.

3.2.3.   Humanising Pedagogy and Democracy

Fostering democracy requires a level of mutual vulnerability as the trauma imposed by authoritarianism affects both those who are oppressed and were oppressed (Keet et. al., 2009). Boyle et al. (2018) expound on the democratic right of parents to be involved in the life of the school, especially when it affects the family directly. The Department of Education (South Africa, 2001) reports on the need for engagement between parents and schools. A humanising pedagogy is one way to address the dehumanising past in South Africa (Zinn & Rodgers, 2012). To explore how this engagement can be enhanced to encourage collaboration, it is beneficial to contemplate the work of Dewey and Freire on democracy and dialogue as key components of parent participation. Dewey (1916) and Freire (2005) considered the role of democracy in schools and classrooms to facilitate change and improvement by including the voices of parents, children and teachers. Sharing experiences through ongoing communication between those in the school fulfils both an educative and social development role as it provides the opportunity for transformation and adaptation (Dewey, 2001). Martin (2021:84) asserts that South Africa needs to transform the approach to education by nurturing responsive parents and building strong foundations that support children and families having successful schooling experiences. All those who participate in the setting are empowered through reflection and questioning the norms to be aware of the knowledge they have and how this knowledge impacts the power within the setting (Keet et.al., 2009). Approaching interactions with parents from a humanistic standpoint supports social justice linked to community building for a transformed social system.

The OECD encourages countries to transform education systems to ultimately alleviate poverty and inequality (OECD, 2012). In South Africa this approach to social justice supports parents by nurturing them to find their voice and share in the process of working together with the schools to create meaningful learning opportunities that will support the community in the long term (Martin, 2021:88). Freire (2005) commented on the relationship between socio-

political systems and education as either maintaining the status quo or working together to create and share knowledge. These relationships need to be built on trust, reflection and action, where all are vulnerable to potential change (Keet et.al., 2009). Moving away from the commodification of education happens when personal agency is encouraged through democratic and humanistic processes (Latecka, 2023). Means (2018) is also cautious of a capitalist approach to education that values economic success to encourage stronger communities. A democratic approach helps people create their own agency and conditions within the environment which in turn supports participation and transformation within the community (Shaik, 2024:7). The intention of a humanising pedagogy is to have parents and teachers working together building the social capital of the setting, thereby improving the outcomes for the whole community. Employing a humanistic pedagogy places the oppressed in an active role as they become part of their own liberation (Latecka, 2023).

Freire (1998:10) acknowledges the paradigm shift as challenging to those who have not been allowed to have a voice, as well as those who have oppressed and marginalised the community. The 'authoritarian ideology' (Freire, 1998:9) remains due to fear of change and loss of power. Embracing a humanising pedagogy supports relationship building through collaboration. A humanising pedagogy embraces social change as the status quo is challenged through reflection and dialogue with the community (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Acknowledging and recognising the humanity in each other and valuing open communication supports a humanising pedagogy (Latecka, 2023). This in turn creates the opportunity for social change and cohesion within the community of the ECCE setting.

3.3. Communities of Practice

As the opportunity to develop a dialogical approach towards all stakeholders is encouraged, ECCE centres can create communities of practice within their individual settings. Fuller (2007) describes a community as a group of people working together with common interests. The centre and parents can be viewed as a supportive community where reciprocal conversations encourage listening to everyone's experiences and knowledge. Padayachee (2021) asserts that this approach unconsciously provides children with a positive role model for building effective and supportive communities who believe in their own sense of agency and adapt the environment as required. Communities of practice are based on participation (Wenger, 1998). Participation occurs through regular interactions of the people in the community. Three elements that identify knowledge creation and conversations as a community are imagination, engagement and alignment (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2007; Wenger, 1998). Imagining the potential of the community and then considering what needs to be done and how this is going to take place helps to know where the responsibility for developing and learning within the community lies. These elements support learning and collaboration to improve what is occurring. Collaboration takes place when participation and reification work together to become the core of what a community is focused on (Wenger, 2008). Reification

is the act of changing abstract thoughts and ideas into something real through community participation to shape a preferred way of being. Wenger (2008) asserts that reification and participation co-exist within a community of practice where the documents, ways of functioning and focus points become evidence of social transformation and are fundamental to the community.

Wenger (2008:2) states that 'communities of practice develop around things that matter to people'. The parents and teachers in the ECCE centre are a community of practice with the common interest of the children. They have the same concerns and passion and will develop their knowledge and experiences through ongoing interactions with each other, sharing ideas and problem-solving together (Wenger et al., 2002).

Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2010) is people learning through participating and interacting on a regular basis. These communities are flexible and provide opportunities for participants to contribute at any point, allowing for new learning opportunities based on similar interests. Sharing information and passing on knowledge will support the co-construction of a parenting model as stakeholders within the ECCE setting problem solve and work together to create change. Wenger describes this as; 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger, 2010:1). Working as a community of practice allows all the stakeholders in the ECCE centre to deepen their knowledge by creating opportunities for ongoing interactions (Wenger et al., 2002). Communities of practice evolve within established spaces, like the ECCE centre, where those who choose to become members of the centre start connecting through ideas and experience sharing (Wenger et al, 2002). The ECCE centre becomes the common space where individuals nurture a sense of identity through developing relationships. Jewson (2007:75) describes 'collective belonging and fitting in with the group as the key source of the identity'.

3.3.1. Learning in Communities of Practice

The teachers and parents are viewed as a community who have skills and knowledge to problem solve and learn from each other. This happens because education is placed within the lived context of the community (Wenger, 2008:3). There is acknowledgement and understanding that each stakeholder in the ECCE centre has agency and shares their knowledge, understanding and experiences. The community of practice needs to be allowed to occur naturally and intuitively within the ECCE centre (Hughes, 2007). McDermott and Snyders (2002) suggest that Wenger's communities of practice use the social structures within a specific context to promote knowledge creation that supports growth and development. Learning from and with each other provides the opportunity for a paradigm shift within the community towards creating social transformation based on interactions and relationships (Hughes, 2007).

Participation in the community might perpetuate established norms and this may limit the potential for social transformation (Fuller, 2007). Limitations may include boundaries that exist

and limit thinking, challenging what a community of practice should be and what takes place in practice (Engström, 2007). Understanding the context of the community of practice helps to embrace the strengths and challenges of boundaries that exist and how these might lead to a resistance to change (Jewson, 2007). Creating the opportunity for parents in ECCE settings to come together to share ideas and insights allows everyone to create a preferred future and a common sense of identity.

A learning community of practice is versatile and flexible as those within the community contribute different learning at different times based on their knowledge and skills (Wenger, 2008). Learning within the community of practice is not an individual process, but rather a social process amongst a group of people who have a shared identity and participate together over a period (Farnsworth et al., 2016).

This approach enhances the development of individual and group agency, as well as the development of a cohesive group of people committed to the same goals and ideas, without being limited by the traditional hierarchical nature of the ECCE setting. The stakeholders within the ECCE setting are a community of practice as they bring their shared experiences as a group, outside of the planned institutional ideas (Wenger 2008:46).

3.3.2. Ubuntu and Communities of Practice

Participating in the community allows the community to transform and change through the development of a shared identity (Wenger 2008:56). In South Africa this sense of identity is Ubuntu, "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", i.e. a person is a person through other persons (Bangura, 2005:31). This is a holistic approach to valuing every aspect of everyone holistically (Bangura, 2005). He expands on this notion to consider 'the art and science of teaching and learning undergirded by humanity towards each other' as ubuntugogy (Bangura, 2005:13). Ubuntugogy positions education within the community based on the cultural norms and values of the community. Being aware of how individuals think and learn in the environment supports individual uniqueness, knowing that we become who we are through our interactions with others (Billet, 2007). The community works together to teach skills and promote community values. This includes caring, respect and finding agreement to create social unity (Bangura, 2005: 32). Inclusivity and responsibility towards the community enhances one's sense of identity and wellbeing (Mayaka & Truell, 2021:651). Ubuntu adds humaneness into all aspects of the community of practice as it upholds and supports group and individual rights and responsibilities, creating and enhancing community connection (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

Ubuntu can be viewed as an integral part of a community of practice based on how people interact and work together. Mutual collaboration creates a sense of belonging with the freedom to ask for help and support from the community. Hughes (2007) notes that this approach also supports the elimination of hierarchical structures within the community as the relationships within the community are based on participation and relationship building. The stakeholders

within the community become who they are because of their participation. In turn they can create meaningful change as they collaborate to work towards a common vison (Watson & Ryan, 2014:85). This collaboration helps set short-term and long-term goals within the community which helps set appropriate expectations of how the community in the ECCE setting can also contribute to the development and growth of the wider community, having a strong sense of identity (Wenger et al., 2002). The community is empowered to build social cohesion (Watson & Ryan, 2014:85) amongst themselves using the courage of their convictions to motivate and commit to a democratic process of engagement.

3.3.3.   Communities of Practice for Democracy and Social Transformation

Wenger (2008) explores the possible challenges and limitations of communities of practice as they are based within wider contexts affected by social, cultural and historical constraints. These constraints often impact notions of where power lies within a community where the relationship between the novice and the expert within the community needs to be both relational and reciprocal (Engström, 2007). Potential tensions may occur between existing community members and new members and the power needs to be harnessed as a valuable aspect of interdependent relationships in the community of practice (Jewson, 2007). Wenger states 'power can prevent learning by silencing voices' (Farnsworth et. al., 2016:154). Consideration needs to be given to how information is controlled by those who are perceived to have power. Jewson (2007) suggests that there needs to be an awareness of cliques within communities, bridging the cliques to strengthen the community. The question of where the power lies within the community of practice is addressed by Farnsworth et al. (2016) by acknowledging the need for boundaries to support competence of the community. The suggestion is to acknowledge how fixed hierarchies impact learning as part of a community. To eliminate hierarchical structures within a community of practice, Engström (2007) suggests collaboration, exploring how people interact and work together, establishing support within the community. Awareness of where the power lies within the community supports the idea that democracy will support the transformation of the community by breaking down barriers and include social participation (Hughes et al., 2007).

Approaching the stakeholders in the ECCE setting in Lavender Hill as a community of practice provides opportunities for the sharing of new ideas, whilst developing rich connections with a democratic approach to valuing information and discussions.

3.4.   Pedagogy-in-participation

To explore how we can encourage all the stakeholders in the ECCE centre in Lavender Hill to be active members of the community, we need to consider how we encourage participation. Participatory pedagogies are often attributed to how children learn best; however, they also have relevance within the relationships the adults in the ECCE centre have. Hedges and Cullen (2011) note that children learn about their culture from the adults around them. If participation is part of the daily community practice amongst the adults, it becomes reflected

in how the children interact with the peers and the adults. Participatory approaches should be based on the daily practices within the ECCE centre based on the lived experiences of all involved (Van Laere et al, 2018). When employing a participatory approach towards the parents, teachers need to move away from a transmissive approach of directing the interactions and relationships towards a constructivist approach allowing personal understanding and experiences to create a new way of functioning within the setting (Huang et al., 2019).

Pedagogy-in-participation is best described as a democratic view of education (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). This approach deconstructs traditional approaches to education through involving those in the community of the school in the construction of learning experiences. Formsinho and Passos (2019) elaborate on the importance of parent participation to support the well-being of the children. Parents can participate in educational areas, activities and as part of the organisation of the ECCE centre. For this to occur, there needs to be ongoing dialogue that supports an understanding of the needs in each of these areas (Formsinho & Passos, 2019). To develop a democratic approach, it is suggested that developing relationships between children and their families to co-construct the learning environment helps create a sense of interconnectedness (Van As et al., 2020; Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Creating democratic spaces within the ECCE environment generates inclusivity and equity which has the potential to infiltrate the broader community. Understanding how meaningful interactions and participation occurs involves knowing the values, beliefs and principles that underpin pedagogy-in-participation.

3.4.1. Exploring Axes of Pedagogy-in-participation

From the outset the intention behind pedagogy-in-participation is to encourage families to assume a level of social responsibility for the ECCE centre. The centre is viewed as a democracy where inclusion, social responsibility, equality and participation by the stakeholders is at the core of supporting the community both within the setting and the wider community (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Pedagogy-in-participation is described as an encounter of various cultures to learn from and create new ideas. This approach builds cultural knowledge for participation and identity formation (Hedges & Cullen, 2011). Creating educational intentionality supports negotiating purpose and processes and is used to develop and strengthen identity to cultivate humanity within the setting. To enable this, it is important that all those involved in the community are respected and encouraged to collaborate and exercise personal agency. Pedagogy-in-participation favours all stakeholders participating completely in the life of the setting to socially construct knowledge and share power (Shaik, 2024:14). Being intentional with parent participation implies seeing the parents not only as supportive but also as facilitators and active participants in the setting (Soltero-Gonzales & Gillanders, 2021). Acknowledgement that participation occurs within the daily practices of the setting and

the community also supports and understanding of how these spaces are then influenced by this practice (van Krieken Robson, 2019).

Formosinho and Formosinho (2012) developed pedagogical axes, as presented in figure 3.1 below. The axes connect participation to socio-historical and cultural identity providing instances to embrace personal agency. Knowledge of this helps provide the opportunity to encourage participation that is democratic and intentional. The axes are:

1. *To be and to feel* – this is where identity develops within a social context and the ECCE centre can provide an environment that breaks down barriers to create a climate of wellbeing for the families.

2. *To belong and participate* – by learning about differences and similarities a sense of belonging is created. Belonging is a social impulse and participation increases a sense of belonging and promotes ties between families and with the centre.

3. *Explore and communicate* – meaning is created through communication. Communication supports interactions and experiences of how thinking and knowing

   occur within the community. The ECCE centre also shows it is open to exploring and connection through its communication with the community.

4. *Narrate and create meaning* – to share and understand is to help create new ways of being. Understanding differences and similarities happens when conversations are encouraged. Learning in the community happens when personal stories and experiences are shared.
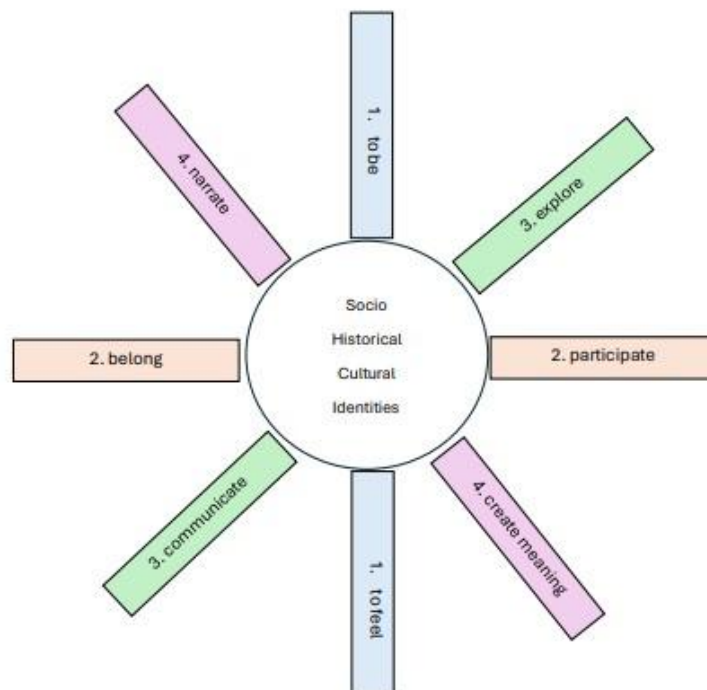
Figure 3-1 Pedagogy-in-participation pedagogical axes

Developing an identity within the social context of the ECCE centre involves valuing the cultural capital of each family to encourage participation, especially when families are economically challenged (Strømme & Helland, 2020). Creating a sense of belonging for parents depends on the language teachers use and how they position themselves as supportive or judgemental (Uitto et.al., 2021). For quality communication to occur, respect and trust is needed where parents are also considered knowledgeable about the needs of their children (Oostdam & Hooge, 2012). The community the family is part of may influence parent-teacher relationships which makes developing a sense of understanding between the two important (Smith et.al., 2022).

The intention of the axes is to cultivate a sense of identity and acknowledging similarities and differences through interactions and dialogue that cultivate a shared sense of identity and relationship. Specific values within the community may be imposed by the ECCE centre which may be problematic as it conflicts with how parents understand their role (van Krieken Robson, 2019). To balance this, the levels of dialogue and communication need to occur to influence parents' perceptions of their role within the relationship (Huang et.al., 2019). Creating a sense of identity also encourages family participation as everyone's rights are valued through ongoing interactions and dialogue between the ECCE centre and the families (Formosinho & Passos, 2019).

3.4.2.   Dialogue and Personal Agency for Participation

Dialogue is an important tool to develop democracy and respect. This approach views all the stakeholders as competent with their own agency to be involved in 'joint thinking, joint doing and joint reflecting' (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012:30). Everyone has the right to be supported and to participate, which in turn develops the sense of unity, collaboration and belonging. The role of the teachers is to listen, understand and respond to everyone in the community. Encouraging parents to participate extensively in the ECCE their child attends has the benefit of making families feel they belong and reduces parents' passivity (Ebrahim et.al., 2023:117). Bilateral communication helps communities share common goals and aspirations (Orberg et.al., 2024:4). Teachers and parents use their personal agency to work within the systems of the ECCE and change aspects that are not considered beneficial for the ECCE community. This is done by being allowed to set personal intentions as well as listening to all the stakeholders in the ECCE (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Creating close ties between the ECCE and the parents has the potential to ensure the wellbeing of the children. The parents value the ECCE for having an open-door policy because there is a culture of understanding the daily life experiences of families and how they are involved in the ECCE (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012).

3.4.3. Pedagogy-in-participation for Social Transformation

Employing a participatory pedagogy requires the belief that all members of the ECCE centre are competent and have personal agency as participants. When developing participatory opportunities, Formosinho and Formosinho (2012) believe in an approach of 'joint thinking, joint doing and joint reflecting'. This helps develop a sense of community and collaboration. Relationship building allows everyone to exert their own agency on the ECCE centre, eliminating boundaries between the participants (Moss, 2019).

The relationships and interactions that occur enable all participants to contribute equally as experiences, knowledge and cultural understanding are valued through honest and open dialogue as potential barriers are broken down (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Consideration is also made for where the power in the relationship within the community lies (Hiatt-Michael, 2005). To manage the power relationship, it is suggested that the teachers encourage parents to become part of the decision-making within the ECCE centre through meaningful conversations to transform the setting and the wider community.

Formosinho and Formosinho (2012) view participatory pedagogy as intentional allowing for meaning creation through conversations that acknowledge the uniqueness of all participants. Parents know their children and the community they live in. This information is used to develop a pedagogy-in-participation that allows parents and teachers to share their identities to support the children (McQuade & Stewart, 2023).

3.5. Conceptual Framework

3.5.1. Introduction

The conceptual framework is developed from the theoretical framework and employed to support the co-creation of a model of parent participation that is bespoke and pertinent to specific educational settings. The focus is to transform the parent teacher relationship from being school centric towards inclusive participation that supports the children, the parents, teachers and the community around the ECCE centre. Encouraging communication that is supportive and builds relationships is woven into open and meaningful interactions that value experiences and knowledge. Having a democratic approach towards learning from and with each other then has the potential to extend beyond the ECCE centre as families and teachers move into new educational settings and employ the same participative approaches there. The intention is to create a transformation over a period which has a positive impact on the setting and the community.

3.5.2. The impact teachers have using democratic dialogue as an approach to parent participation

Teachers in ECCE centres should be aware of the impact they can have in building supportive relationships based on open and honest communication to build democratic dialogue (Bipath, 2022). Parent-teacher relationships have the potential to break down barriers especially when teachers take on the responsibility of connecting with the parents (Chan & Ritchie, 2016).

Teachers who are valued by the community can build relationships that encourage open, collaborative communication (Bipath, 2022). Approaching parent participation as the opportunity to work as a community to build relationships based on individual knowledge and experiences aligns with the concept of ubuntu where parents and teachers have meaningful interactions to support the children and the ECCE centre (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019).

In the development of a democratic approach Freire (1998:6) believes educators should evaluate their practice to make changes and improvements within the ECCE centre. Teachers need to be aware of their role and how this may lean towards an authoritarian stance. Essentially the authoritarian approach is perpetuated and repeated. Changing this would include allowing opportunity for open conversations that are reciprocal in nature. Collaboration and cooperation interlink the community and underpin ubuntu where personal identity is supported and developed through interactions with others (Mayaka & Truell, 2021; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). Teachers can spend time developing insights into parents' perspectives of how to meet the needs of the children based on individual values and lived experiences (Li et.al., 2020:333).

Teachers can be agents of change with an awareness that the fear they have is an indication of how far they are on the journey to democratic dialogue with families (Freire, 1998:41). Teachers are tasked with creating relationships with families and the children in their classroom. Doing this requires the teachers to have a curiosity and openness to new ideas and interests of the children (Freire, 1998:17). This relates well with the concept of 'it takes a village to raise a child', where there are several key players who support children by collaborating respectfully (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022; Modise, 2022). This approach may produce insecurities and a fear of the unknown; yet Freire (1998:27) believes teachers must not let this stop them trying a new approach in the classroom and with the families.

Developing a democratic approach requires school management, teachers and parents to understand their fears and insecurities towards a new approach. The question of where the power lies within the ECCE centre also needs to be acknowledged to ensure democracy is enacted (Shaik, 2024:13). There is a need to develop a sense of curiosity towards reassuring the voices of all in the ECCE centre are heard. Harrison and Madingoaneng (2022:468) suggest that constant communication between parents and the ECCE setting should occur, where both parties listen to each other and felt heard. Fear should not be the reason change does not occur. All stakeholders need to overcome their fears to take personal responsibility for any change that takes place in the ECCE centre. If this does not occur, stakeholders apportion blame and abdicate their personal responsibility to make change. It is easier to maintain a status quo than to take a risk and do something different. When we reinvent ourselves and the environment, creative risks take place that leads to transformation and change (Freire, 1998:37).

3.5.3. Key aspects of the conceptual framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 3.2 employs key elements of the theoretical framework to ensure the relationship between each of the theories is represented, enabling the creation of a model of parent participation. This framework provides an overall illustration of how elements of the theoretical framework influence the data collection and analysis. Central to the goal of this research is ensuring that democracy, participation and a supportive and inclusive community is considered to promote parent participation. In the creation of the conceptual framework, it is the awareness that participation is often connected to how the ECCE setting is created. There may be a hierarchical, top-down approach that does not appear to value participation, and this can challenge the sense of belonging parents may want to have within the setting (Wenger, 2008:173).
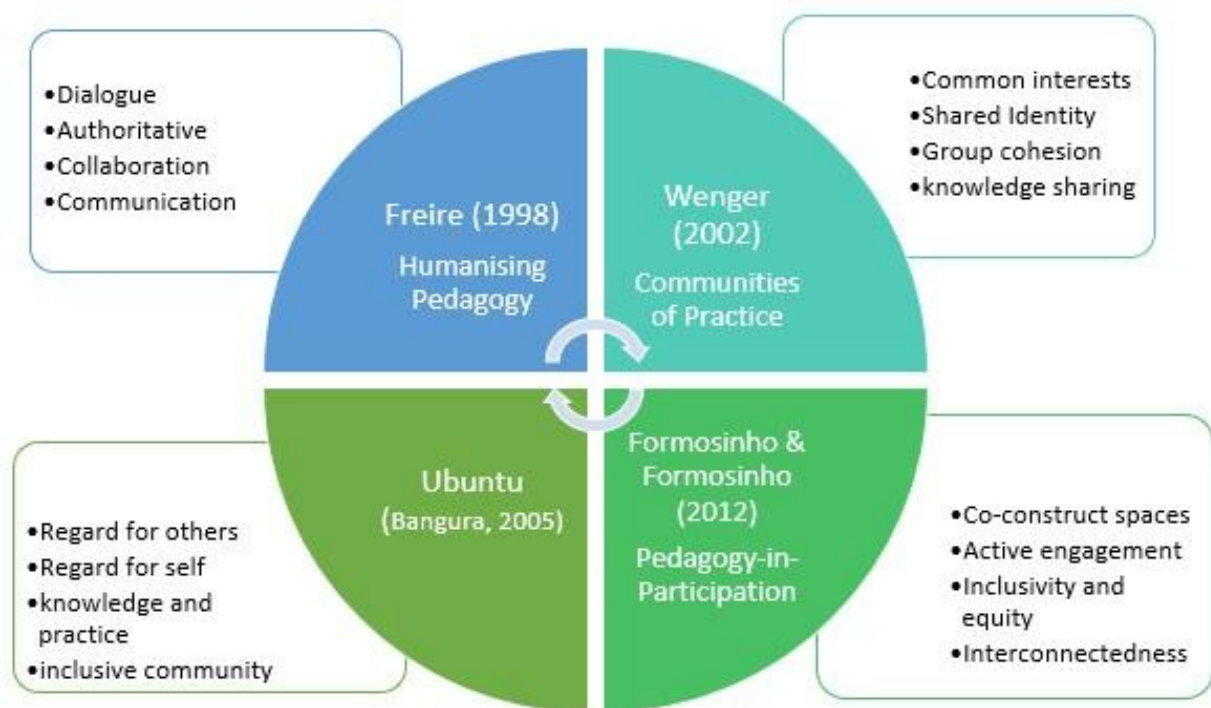
Figure 3-2 Conceptual Framework

3.5.3.1. *Humanising Pedagogy*

Providing meaningful and transparent dialogue is the opportunity for those in the community to share experiences and knowledge that can be used for the benefit of the setting. How information is gathered and shared in the ECCE centre should include the whole community as they know more, and sometimes better, than those who may be visitors, or manage the setting (Freire, 1998: xvi). Encouraging parents to engage in dialogue may take time as the remnants of past experiences and personal perceptions of self-worth may stifle communication. Humanising pedagogy responds to a society that has past traumas and injustices through mutual vulnerability valuing individual contributions and not dominating or having a deficit view of people within the setting (Keet, et.al., 2009). In ECCE centres settings teachers are generally responsible for promoting a humanising pedagogy through their own

pedagogical principles and practices as well as being tasked with being the custodians of communication and collaboration (del Carmen Salazar, 2013:136).

To ensure the approach is in line with a democratic pedagogy teachers may initiate communication but then create opportunities for parents to take the lead and offer their own ideas to support the setting. Embracing and sharing individual experiences is the opportunity for self-expression with everyone knowing they are being listened to. To transform the community and overcome cultural inheritances it is vital that teachers get to know the families in the setting and learn from them (Freire 1998:71). Being aware of one's own presence in the setting provides the opportunity and freedom to grow a sense of self-determination through engaging with those on the community for transformation to occur (del Carmen Salazar, 2013:126).

Sharing information and experiences aligns with a democratic approach to sharing power. Humanisation considers the role of power in the relationship with dehumanisation being the result of too much or too little power (Torres, 2014:46). Individual agency is valued, and all knowledge is used to encourage critical debate and discussion. Open conversations create opportunities for curiosity and flexibility by building self-confidence in individuals through a problem-based approach that does not control anyone (Lateka, 2023:637).

Collaboration occurs through these conversations with all experiences having value that supports relationship building and social transformation. Sharing information strengthens the links between home and the ECCE centre and helps establish roles within the setting. Choices and decisions made require evaluation and comparison that upfront tolerance and understanding as well as fears, as part of the process of change (Freire, 1998:42). Consideration must be given to individuals feeling vulnerable, especially considering South Africa's historic past. When people are encouraged to collaborate and share their concerns and ideas, it reduces fear and promotes community development (Torres, 2014:5). Viewing all participants in the setting as active and not passive contributors to the daily life of the ECCE centre by empowering the individual who takes this experience into the wider community offers the opportunity for broad social transformation. Being committed to transformation requires the community to practice incorporating new ideas to create lasting change (Freire, 2017:2).

3.5.3.2. *Communities of practice*

Working as a community of practice based on shared interests requires communication that encourages sharing thoughts and ideas that can be used to create action and change within the setting. Sharing interests benefits the ECCE centre by promoting personal agency that supports change and growth. Integrating into the ECCE centre should be gradual as it is linked to thinking and being with personal adjustments being made to what the setting needs (Torres, 2014:44). When common interest is established, the focus of the setting is based in joint problem-solving as challenges and successes are discussed and resolved. Relationships are

based on the people involved in the community of practice giving individuals agency as the norms of the community of practice are established (Billet, 2007:56).

In low SES communities, like Lavender Hill, the community can also develop group cohesion to help solve local societal problems experienced. This can start by using the knowledge of those in the community as the base for creating change (Freire, 2017:60). Problem-solving through regular interactions helps transform the community as common interests are strengthened by sharing knowledge and experiences. Freire (1998:39) suggests that no one has all the knowledge as everyone knows something and should be afforded the opportunity to share information. Developing knowledgeable relationships occurs through negotiation based on the specific context over time and these relationships form the community (Farnsworth et.al., 2016:143). There is also the opportunity to discuss existing hierarchies to consider how the status quo can be shifted to provide change. Reflecting on who has power within the setting and how this needs to be addressed also helps develop a group identity that includes flexibility that supports change. These discussions may upfront potential tensions that exist between pedagogical practices and existing policies within the setting that may be restrictive and limit knowledge sharing (del Carmen Salazar, 2013:125).

Group cohesion occurs as knowledge becomes shared between the members of the community and this supports the evolution of the ECCE setting, especially with the movement of parents and teachers into and out of the setting. Everyone can express their ideas learning about themselves and the community around them providing the opportunity for social transformation (Torres 2014:8). New ideas and knowledge are included, and those who move out of the ECCE centre take their knowledge and experiences, sharing them with the new spaces they enter. Being part of a community implies a sense of belonging and identity within the community and tensions may occur between newcomers and the existing community members (Jewson, 2007:72). Valuing the knowledge held by those in the ECCE centre, and new members, offers the opportunity for reflection and dialogue that challenges the status quo encouraging participation and not oppression (Irwin, 2012:36). Communities of practice happen within contexts that have their own strengths and challenges, and it is important to be aware of possible cliques that may occur finding a way to strengthen the community without being to inward looking and having a closed-door approach (Jewson 2007; Wenger 2002).

3.5.3.3. *Pedagogy-in-participation*

Creating a community of practice occurs through active participation. Pedagogy-inparticipation is the opportunity for interactions that help deconstruct traditional approaches whilst creating an awareness of common goals within the setting (Formosinho & Formosinho 2012:3). The nature of ECCE settings includes having new families joining and existing families leaving throughout the academic year. To ensure successful participation creating continuity of understanding and skills between new and experienced members is vital for the success of the setting (Unwin 2007:113). Together all the members of the community construct knowledge

and share power by valuing the cultural capital of each member. Valuing personal experiences and understanding of those in the community helps to co-construct new ways of working together for the benefit of the ECCE centre. del Carmen Salazar (2013:127) suggests that participation in a humanising pedagogy is not necessarily transferrable across multiple contexts and should rather be adapted to each unique context. Engaging in debate and discussions helps the community look for similarities, creating unity through diversity (Freire, 2017:143). The individuals within the setting take responsibility by sharing values and beliefs acknowledging that similarities and differences provide the space to be inclusive and equitable. Participatory pedagogy is democratic at its heart in values, beliefs and principles (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012:4).

This does not come without difficulties as the transition from autocracy to democracy may come with democratic inexperience where participants may not understand their individual role or their collective responsibility (Irwin, 2012:84). Supporting new approaches towards the community should include times of observation which Hughes (2007:35) refers to as peripheral participation to allow for learning to happen. It would then be appropriate to include open dialogue based on sharing experiences and thoughts creates a sense of belonging and develops a shared identity. The stakeholders within the ECCE centre form the habit of interactions where personal agency allows changes within the setting to occur (Formosinho & Formosinho 2012:45). The right to believe in a socially transformed community exists and is allowed to happen by building on what occurs currently to create new ideas and approaches (Torres, 2014:9). All stakeholders are viewed as competent and agentic in the co-construction of the ECCE community. This is not always easy as it requires constant reflection on participatory practice ensuring there is consistency between what is said and done to avoid ambiguity and ensure democratic practice is central to co-constructing interactions (Freire 1998:67). Equity in contribution towards the community offers the opportunity for active engagement that further supports the setting. Through participation in social practices learning and interacting is co-constructed as the group is valued more than the individual (Fuller 2007:17). Being actively engaged is empowering as it values individual contributions and offers the opportunity to learn together as the community becomes transformed into a democratic space.

3.5.3.4. *Ubuntu*

Transforming the ECCE centre occurs through collaboration by the individuals within the setting, as agreement is sought in the creation of social cohesion. Keet et.al. (2009) describe the African concept of personhood as being rooted in group solidarity and mutual vulnerability. Having regard for the experiences and knowledge other have occurs through open democratic dialogue where all voices are valued within the setting.

Being inclusive ensures the community takes joint responsibility to create a sense of belonging. To do this, the individuals within the setting are encouraged to value their

contributions towards the success of the wider community. Inter-cultural dialogue promotes success within the ECCE centre by promoting equality and social responsibility (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012:6).

Everyone uses their own knowledge to develop themselves to support others within the community. Torres (2014:29) suggests that we perceive ourselves through the historically determined society around us which can be limiting. Successful connections between those in the community provides the opportunity to change this as everyone learns together and regard each contribution as vital to the success of the ECCE centre. The stakeholders are viewed as acting on and transforming their world through new ideas and possibilities whilst working collectively to create change in the context of the setting (Irwin, 2012:21). The relationships that develop are based on ongoing participation that extends beyond the setting as parents move into other educational settings taking their experiences with them to continue transforming the wider community. Ensuring a fatalistic view of the community does not exist requires taking the time to work on creating a different future by viewing existing issues from multiple perspectives reconciling ideas and experiences (Freire, 2017:91). Learning about differences and similarities supports belonging and participation through exploration and communication that promotes a sense of identity by breaking down barriers (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012:9). Building on cultural norms and values created in the ECCE setting has the potential to extend into the wider community.

As parents and teachers challenge established expectations of participation and acknowledge the value and self-regard, they have through their own contributions enables them to make changes within the community. When all within the community have a voice, democracy becomes central as individuals contribute to change and influence the society leading to transformation (Freire, 2017:103).

3.6.   Chapter Summary

Employing Freire's (2005) concept of humanising dialogue enables ECCE centres to transform into spaces where the parents have a voice and contribute. This creates a space that is truly democratic, as suggested by Dewey (1916) and Wenger's (2010) community of practice, which further supports a democratic approach to problem-solving and community building. Formosinho and Formosinho (2012) strongly encourage relationship building as central to participation as part of the community. The theoretical framework in this study supports the use of a democratic approach to developing a parent model that will create strong bonds between parents and the ECCE centre resulting in successful ECCE centres that support the families and the children (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019:167).

The conceptual framework presented considers an interwoven approach to co-constructing a model of parent participation. The theoretical frameworks used in this research align with the concept of ubuntu through building connections. Each element builds on the theories of

personal agency, democratic approaches and the opportunity for all to participate equally in the creating of a site-specific parent participation model. Developing a model of parent participation that is agentic, democratic and promotes social cohesion relies on all stakeholders being brought together whilst acknowledging individual experiences of the world and using these experiences as a strength. This is counter to the setting being viewed as 'all knowing' and the parents viewed as disinterested or having a deficit approach to their personal involvement and contribution to the life of their child's ECCE setting.

Chapter 4 Research Methodology

4.1.   Introduction

This research study is an interpretive, qualitative exploration of understandings of parent participation in one ECCE centre in Lavender Hill, Cape Town. This chapter provides detail on how the study was designed, how data was collected and analysed to answer the research questions, as well as supporting the development of a potential model for parent participation. I present the approaches I employed to conduct the study by including a narrative account of the steps taken throughout the research process. A description of the site of the research, the participants and the data collection process are presented along with the process of data analysis. Critical aspects of research positionality, trustworthiness and ethical considerations are also addressed.

4.2.   Research Approach

The research onion approach of Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) supported the process of decision making regarding the choice of tools and methodology enabling me to arrive at an interpretivist and qualitative approach to the research. In this research the lived experiences of the ECCE centre and parents helps create an understanding of parent participation within the context of Lavender Hill. Qualitative research offers the opportunity to employ multiple forms of data collection, and this research included semi-structured interviews, journals, document analysis and an AI workshop and supports an iterative process towards data analysis (Henn et al., 2014:182). Intervention based research was utilised through an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process as an empowerment tool for the participants to develop a parenting model for their ECCE centre (Ebersöhn et al., 2013:131). The AI is a transformational and developmental approach mirroring action research and forms part of the data collection. Using AI as one of the data collection tools will be elaborated on as part of the data collection process in chapter 4 as well as in the data analysis in chapter 5.

I began the process using an interpretivist paradigm which allows me to explore the realities of the ECCE centres and parent participation within an area of Lavender Hill. The interpretive paradigm (Merriam, 2015:11) allowed me to describe and interpret parent participation within the ECCE setting in Lavender Hill. This interpretation of the data assisted in creating links between the research and what takes place in practice within the ECCE setting (Ebersöhn et al., 2013:127). An interpretivist paradigm acknowledges that we are active participants in the world around us and can consider a course of action based on our interpretation of situations (Henn, et al., 2014: 15). As the researcher the interpretivist paradigm affords the opportunity to ensure clarity and accuracy in interpretation, letting the researcher respond to unexpected responses to questions and situations (Merriam, 2015:15). During the process of interpreting the data I was aware of ensuring the voice of the participants was present. The intention behind doing this is to mirror the process of developing a model of parent participation through a humanising pedagogy that has the voice of the participants at the fore of the research. I was

also aware of possible biases, not with the intention of eliminating them, but rather being aware of them to add to the quality of the data collection and analysis. Ebersöhn et al. (2013) describe this awareness as adding to the research as the participant's multiple points of view are part of the data collection. The subjective nature of the researcher as an active participant is described by Braun and Clarke (2024:387) as adding to the flexible and natural approach to thematic analysis. In data analysis the philosophical underpinnings, knowledge and skill of the researcher impact the generation of themes, ensuring themes cannot be created in advance of the process as they occur organically through exploration (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

4.2.1. Figured World 4: Troubling Discourse

The choices made in developing the research approach are based on the theoretical framework of the study as discussed in Chapter 3. Figured Worlds was first suggested by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2001:40) as how people socially construct their world based on personal understandings and experiences and how this supports their construction of personal identity and agency. Kamberelis, Dimitriadis and Welker (2018) developed the concept of Figured Worlds as an approach to qualitative inquiry where the researcher considers their epistemological and ontological approaches towards research. This includes data collection, analysis and interpretation. From a research perspective I was acutely aware of my role in how knowledge and information was interpreted as I worked to ensure the voice of the participants was foregrounded in the research. The aim of constructing the research questions is to ensure the participants have the opportunity to give voice to their experiences and understanding of parent participation.

Kamberelis et al. (2018) developed five Figured Worlds as a heuristic approach to research. Each Figured World provides the researcher with the opportunity to reflect on how they approach their research, with a level of flexibility to move between epistemological and ontological leanings as research strategies and approaches are considered. Each Figured World considers the researcher's approach to knowledge, relations, agency and practice on the part of the researcher. Figure 4.1 below shows the 'topoi' (analysis of logic) nature of the Figured Worlds as the worlds become interconnected providing little structure allowing for a dynamic approach to research (2018:693).
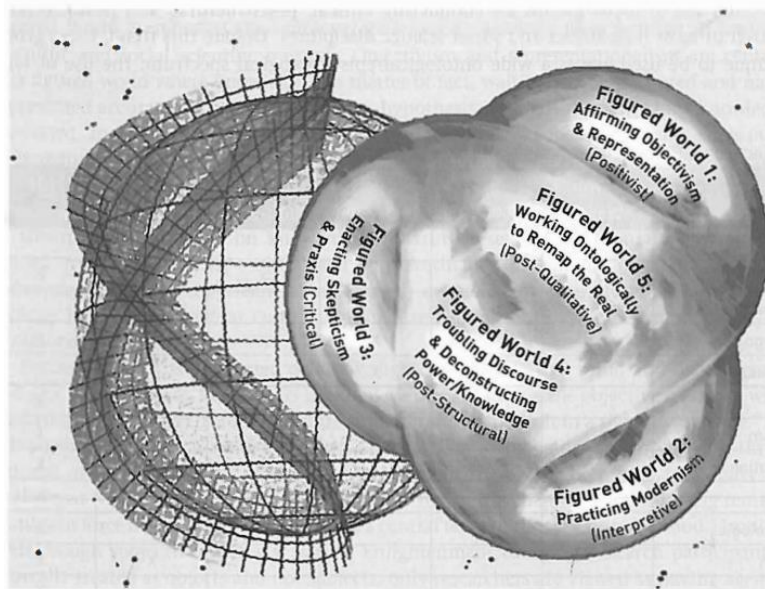
Figure 4-1 Topoi Source: Kamberelis et. al. (2018:693)

Figured World 4 resonated with the research approach to reconsider power and knowledge in the development of a potential model of parent participation. Figured world 4 views knowledge as socially constructed using language as its main tool. The participants are viewed as agentic, as what they have to say matters. In the research process the voice of the participants is foregrounded through interactive dialogue. The researcher and the participants explore how knowledge and power are used to control and disempower the community. This approach provides the opportunity to 'trouble the status quo' (Kamberelis et. al., 2018:696) thereby creating social change.

In this research the initial data collected was the ECCE centre policies and documentation on how the setting operates including the expectations placed on parents to participate in the ECCE centre. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, parents and the principal to gain insight into personal understanding of parent participation. Parents who participated in the semi-structured interviews were also asked if they would keep a journal that documents their participation within the setting. An AI (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001) workshop took place as an opportunity to gain insight into understandings of parent participation and provide the opportunity to create changes within the settings approach to parent participation (Costello, 2003:5). The details of each of the data collection processes have been described in chapter 3 and the execution and use of each tool is elaborated on in chapter 5, providing detailed information on each of the tools and the process of data collection.

Interpretation was conducted, using the Braun and Clarkes (2006, 2024) six-step recursive process of reflexive thematic analysis to 'mine' the data generating themes based on the literature review and the theoretical framework presented. Braun and Clarke (2024:387) define themes to 'capture and tell an interpretive story about a patterning of meaning, united by a core concept or idea'. The themes were generated through my interpretation of the data. I was

aware of my assumptions and interpretation of these themes during the analysis. This Big Q orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2024) towards the generation of themes occurs as the themes become the starting point for analysis based on the researcher's construction of the data for analysis. Thematic analysis is useful in the superficial creation of themes that can then be explored in greater detail through interpretation of these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2024:386). The themes provide the opportunity to develop a model of parent participation based on the lived experiences of all the stakeholders in the research.

4.2.2.   The Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024) provides the opportunity to review the four data sets continuously ensuring the voice of the participants is evident and their ideas and experiences are at the forefront of the analysis. Approaching data analysis in this way provides the opportunity to be creative, allowing space for researcher subjectivity as Braun and Clarke (2019) encourage a move away from analysis as a procedure of discovery to one that is reflexive and involves storytelling and making meaning from those stories.

Reflexive thematic analysis of the data aligns with the theoretical framework. The approach is based on foregrounding the voice of the participants in the research as they develop a model of parent participation relevant to their ECCE centre. Exploration of the data considers how parents and teachers understand and promote parent participation based on their own experiences. The parent participation model is created with the best interests of all the stakeholders at the heart of it and is relevant to this setting. The intention of the participatory parent model is that is also transferrable to other ECCE settings, where it can be used to formulate their preferred way of embedding parent participation.

The goal of substantial parent participation is to enable the setting and the community to build a community of practice focussing on the interests of the children. Biersteker et al. (2023:6). consider the best interest of the child possibly conflicting with what the adults believe. They go on to describe 'the right to participation' as being closely aligned to the best interests of the child. To mitigate the conflict between the adult and child, a model of parent participation can create the opportunity for dialogue and social cohesion where parents and teachers align their approaches to build a strong community of practice. The research questions and data analysis provided the opportunity to develop a clearer understanding of how this ECCE setting uses parent participation to upfront the best interests of the children, as well as the wider community the ECCE centre is in.

The data analysis process was reflective and iterative supporting the development of a model of parent participation by moving between the various datasets, the theoretical framework and literature. I include the story of each of the data collection processes as each one piqued my curiosity and reminded me of the purpose of the research I am doing (Braun & Clarke, 2024:120).

4.3.   Research Site and Participants

4.3.1.   Site Selection

One Early Childhood and Care and Education centre based in Lavender Hill, Cape Town was the site for this research. Lavender Hill is renowned for high levels of crime and poverty (Hodkinson et al., 2020). Lavender Hill is considered a disadvantaged community in Cape Town, prone to gang violence. The intention of using one site is based on the research intention of developing a bespoke model of parent participation allowing the ECCE centre to focus on their own particular needs in terms of parent participation.

The ECCE centre admits children between 2 years and 6 years old. The classroom is one large rectangular space that is also used as a church on the weekends. There are 34 children in the school who all work together in one mixed age classroom. The medium of instruction is English; however, all the teachers and children are Afrikaans and make use of this during the school day. All the children are from the community around the ECCE centre. At the time of the research all the children lived with and were cared for by their biological parents/mothers. The ECCE centre runs on Montessori (1974) principles and is highly sought after as a preschool of choice in the area. A small percentage of families (20%) pay the full monthly school fees, whilst other children attend free or for a nominal charge. The preschool prides itself on being a role model within the Lavender Hill offering practical and emotional support to the families within the community. Following the Montessori philosophy allows the teachers to offer children and parents an alternative approach to child rearing with the intention of this philosophy spreading into the community. One of the purposes of following the Montessori philosophy is to build a sense of community spirit where all members of the community are involved in caring for the setting(Cossentino & Whitcomb, 2007). Community spirit is built by connecting with everyone in the community through dialogue and ongoing communication.

This ECCE centre encourages connection by creating 'safe circles' (Learning in Reach, 2022). 'Safe circles' was developed by the NGO Learning in Reach, based on Pranis' (n.d.) idea of circle keepers with all the teachers having completed trauma-informed training to offer support to the parents who are dealing with the stresses of living in this area of extreme violence and trauma. To offer effective 'safe circles', the staff in the setting develop a partnership with the parents to know who best to support them within their family and the wider community of Lavender Hill.

4.3.2.   Participant Selection

An informal opportunity to attend a local ECD forum meeting, in Lavender Hill, alerted me to concerns the principals of the ECCE centres were raising regarding lack of parent involvement, engagement and participation. Using purposive sampling (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010:136) to explore this in more detail, the principal, four teachers and seven parents were purposively selected as participants in semi-structured interviews prior to an AI. They are all parents and teachers within the ECCE setting and have an interest in children being

comfortable and happy. The seven parents who participated in the semi-structured interviews and completed the journals reflect the characteristics of the wider parent body of the ECCE centre and can provide detailed information on parent participation (Menter, 2011:136). The teachers in the ECCE centre all have experience of working in traditional ECD centres in Lavender Hill. The principal of this centre trained at a Montessori training centre and oversees the teachers employed in this centre who have limited Montessori knowledge and are in training as Montessori teachers. All the teachers live in the area and are well known by the parents and the community, as they also engage in community projects with the NGO that initiated the opening of the ECCE centre four years ago. An overview the participants in the semi-structured interviews are described in table 4-1.

Table 4-1 Participants in Semi-structured Interviews Source: Author's own construct (2024)

Function	Gender	Parental status	Educational level	Employment status	Years at the ECE centre
Participant 1	Female	single	Level 5 ECD	Employed	4 years
Participant 2	Male	married	Matric	Employed	2 years
Participant 3	Female	single	Grade 11	Employed	1 year
Participant 4	Female	married	Matric	Employed	1 year
Participant 5	Female	single	Grade 10	Unemployed	2 years
Participant 6	Female	single	Grade 11	Unemployed	1 year
Participant 7	Female	married	Grade 11	Unemployed	1 year
Participant 8	Female	married	Grade 10	Unemployed	1 year
Participant 9	Female	single	Grade 11	Unemployed	1 year
Participant 10	Female	married	Grade 7	Unemployed	1 year
Participant 11	Female	married	Grade 11	Unemployed	1 year

The AI was open to all stakeholders (parents, caregivers and staff) in the ECCE setting to have as many voices as possible contributing to the inquiry. This aligns well with a democratic approach to develop social cohesion by co-constructing a context appropriate approach to a parent model. I am aware that the Department of Social Development (DSD) is responsible for the correct registration of ECCE centres; however, with the function shift from DSD to DBE there is currently no model that facilitates the monitoring of parent participation.

4.4. The Data Generation Process

Ensuring that all participants fully understand the value their voice brings to the creation of a parenting model required me to create a 'safe circle' space with the help of the teachers. Working in the Lavender Hill community gave me insight into understanding the value of building relationships with community members before embarking on the research. It is important to be open and honest with the parents and spend time making them feel

comfortable with me and the research process. The initial meeting to explain the research process, the semi-structured interviews and the explanation of the journaling process provided the opportunity needed to develop this relationship with the initial seven parents.

The starting point for the data collection was an analysis of the ECCE centre's protocols and documents to explore how parent participation is viewed from a policy perspective within the ECCE centre.

As part of defining the topic, time was spent exploring the participants understanding of parent participation. Specifically, terminology about parent participation versus parent involvement and engagement were explored.

The semi-structured interviews explored participants understandings of parent participation as well as their lived experiences of it. The parents who participated in the semi-structured interviews were asked to keep a journal to record their personal experiences of parent participation.

The AI was well attended by the entire parent body, 27 parents and 4 teachers and provided the opportunity to use the participants' best experiences of participation. Based on the information gathered during the AI, the parents and teachers worked together to create a vision of parent participation for this ECCE centre. This was facilitated by me, as the researcher, as part of the AI process. In preparation for the AI workshop, I identified potential power imbalances (Moss, 2019:121) as the parents may feel cautious about sharing their experiences, whilst the principal and teachers may assume leadership roles within the discussions. To address the potential power imbalances within the workshop, I took the time to outline the intention of the workshop as finding common ground through shared experiences that facilitate the community working positively together, and that all decisions are group decisions (Reed, 2007:70). In the process of the AI workshop refers to how equity of ideas and each participant's voice is valued through collaboration and valuing individual contributions towards parent participation (Moss, 2019).

For clarity a timeline and approach to the various data collection methods including information on time frames and participant engagement and length of each is included in appendix G providing an overview of the complete data collection approach.

Based on all the data collected I created a potential model of parent participation in collaboration with the stakeholders of this ECCE centre. This model will be reviewed after as part of an ongoing AI process. All the data gathered was analysed thematically. This will be discussed in the data analysis section below.

The use of multiple methods of data collection enables multiple points of view and perspectives (Ebersöhn et al., 2013:129) to develop an understanding of the issue being researched, in this instance, parent participation. The use of AI, alongside the mentioned data collection methods, will contribute to the development of a context specific model for parental participation within

ECCE settings. The data collected in this research provided rich and thick descriptions and supports the idea that information gathered in this research setting may be transferred to other settings as well (Merriam, 2015).

4.4.1. Semi-structured Interviews

The use of semi-structured interviews in qualitative research aligns with the interpretivist approach of acknowledging the experiences of the participants in relation to the phenomenon being researched. Brinkmann (2018:594) further suggests that sharing experiences gives 'voice' to the participants. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to plan a core set of questions to explore understandings of parent participation, whilst allowing for probing of answers to these set questions, as a means of unearthing personal and subjective understandings (Nieuwenhuis, 2013:87; Mukherji & Albon, 2015: 154).

The data gathered in the interviews provides insight into parents' understanding of how they view their role as part of the ECCE setting. The interviews also provided the opportunity for the principal and teachers to express their personal understanding of how the parents are encouraged to participate in the ECCE centre. Semi-structured interviews allow participants the opportunity to elaborate on how they view themselves as part of the setting and what they value by participating in the setting. It is an opportunity for participants to share their views on parent participation using their own language and terminology. This helps the researcher develop an understanding of the participants' experiences and attitudes towards the topic whilst also providing an opportunity for clarification of ideas and knowledge shared in the interview process (Menter, 2011; Mukherji & Albon, 2015). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to plan a core set of questions to explore understandings of parent participation, whilst allowing for probing of answers to these set questions, as a means of unearthing personal and subjective understandings (Nieuwenhuis, 2013:87).

There are also potential challenges using semi-structured interviews which include participants wanting to provide the 'correct' answer, perceived power dynamics and language barriers. Shubotz (2020:149) cautions the researcher to be sensitive to the perceived hierarchy that may occur in the interview process. I was sensitive to how I probed the participants to elaborate on their answers trying to ensure quality responses were obtained. Menter (2011:128) calls on the researcher to be sensitive to the participants and put them at ease with the interview process. It also allowed me to address potential challenges and ensure ethical compliance. The semi-structured interviews were face-to-face interviews which provided the opportunity to build a rapport with the individual participants to meet their needs and make them feel comfortable.

The questions in the semi-structured interviews offer a guide to the area being explored, based on the research questions, aims and objectives. Using the core questions the researcher can gauge the participants' knowledge and experience, asking further unscripted questions. The core questions are not set in stone, but rather a reminder of areas that need to be covered

(Menter, 2011:133) which in turn provides a degree of consistency throughout all the semi-structured interviews. For the purposes of researching parent participation, core questions were created for each group of participants, principal, teachers, parents, in the semi-structured interviews (See Appendix D).

The questions are guided by the literature and research questions to explore parent participation from their perspective and experience. There is some similarity with the questions, but each set of questions also provided a guide to the area the participant functions in within the ECCE centre. Their individual understanding of parent participation is explored based on the role they fulfil within the centre.

One of the potential challenges of the interview process is the level of understanding by the participants due to potential language barriers. Menter (2011:135) encourages researchers to consider the needs of the participants ensuring they can share their knowledge and experiences on the topic at hand. In the ECCE centre, the participants in the semi-structured interviews all spoke their mother tongue, Afrikaans. Knowing they could speak in their mother tongue ensured the participants were able to provide clear insights into their experiences of parent participation. Making sure all the participants were comfortable and understood the questions being asked also addressed the challenge of not needing to supply a 'correct' answer but rather speak from their own experiences. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviewing supported the individual participants as they shared their experiences.

4.4.1.1. *The story of the semi-structured interviews*

On the day I met with the parents, it was a cold morning and the start of a long weekend. The implication of this was seven parents arrived for the initial meeting to discuss the research project. These parents were all mothers in the ECCE setting. The principal told me she did not approach fathers as they are not reliable. Every aspect of the research project was explained to the parents, including what would be expected of them in terms of time commitment and how they would be involved in semi-structured interviews, journaling and a one-day AI workshop. The response was subdued as this was the first time the parents had met me. The principal assured me that once they feel comfortable, they become 'chattier'. As they were leaving one parent commented that she looked forward to taking part in the research project as it would give her something to focus on. As we were leaving the school a parent who had been asked by the principal to participate, but had not arrived, walked past and apologised but she had slept late. She indicated she would still be interested in taking part. I made myself available to discuss consent with any parents who were interested in being part of the semistructured interviews. Another parent had also approached a teacher to ask why she had not been asked to participate. I acknowledged her willingness to contribute to the research and included her in the semi-structured interview process. Once this initial meeting was completed, we agreed that one teacher would plan times for the semi-structured interviews to take place at a time that suited the parents.

The seven parents who attended the initial meeting were eager to contribute their time and experiences to the research. The interview times and days were set for the convenience of the seven parents who made themselves available. Three of the parents interviewed felt more comfortable answering the questions in Afrikaans as this was their home language. At times parents appeared unsure of the questions I was asking, and I would rephrase the questions to make the participants feel comfortable and to prevent barriers where participants felt they could not answer the questions. Semi-structured interviews supported this approach as the questions are worded flexibly and I could respond in the moment to support the participants (Merriam, 2015). The interviews happened outside and at times surrounding environmental noises and wind were a challenge to clarity of the recordings.

The principal and teachers were interviewed over two days to make sure the children were not left unattended. The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to gain insight into the participants' description of their world and how they participate in the ECCE centre (Brinkman, 2018; Merriam, 2015). The principal and teachers were comfortable in the interviews as I had worked with them in other settings, and we had established relationships. Brinkman (2018) reminds interviewers of the effect they may have on those being interviewed. As the principal and teachers know me in my position as a trainer for the NGO they work for, I had to be conscious of my positionality to ensure they did not feel judged by me. I was aware of the teachers feeling that they may need to provide the 'right' answers to questions. In addition, I was aware of the perceptions the parents may have of me, and I started off each interview making them feel comfortable by initiating a general conversation with each of them to learn more about their individual experiences (Brinkman, 2018). This included making sure I understood the language and culture of the participants to gain their trust (Fontana & Frey, 2003).

4.4.2. Journals

Reflective journaling, as a tool, aligns well with AI as it can be used to solve problems and encourage communication (Lowe et al., 2013: 6). The reflective journal is used as a tool to explore parents' interactions and participation within the setting. This helps develop an understanding of how the parents view their opportunities to participate in centre activities and how they interpret the experiences. Journaling may have entries that are detailed or general, that occur daily or occasionally (Mukherji & Albon, 2015). The journaling enables the parents to reflect on the nature of their participation, considering any changes they would make to enhance their participation. The journal provided the participants with five guiding questions to consider as they reflected on their participation (See Appendix E).

The journal was an opportunity for the parents to add their own experiences and voice to their role within the ECCE setting anonymously. Journaling, as a tool, allows parents to reflect on their experiences in the centre and is also a means of collecting data (Lowe et al., 2013). The opportunity to journal before and after the AI workshop allowed the parents to note any shifts

in their own experiences of participation in the setting. The value of the reflective journal includes being able to track experiences and any changes that have occurred, reflecting on their efficacy. One possible limitation of journaling is that the author of the journal may feel they will be judged on the information they share, and this may cause them to be guarded with the information they share (Mukherji & Albon, 2015).

4.4.2.1. *The story of the journals*

After the semi-structured interviews each of the seven participants were invited to a group meeting where the process of reflective journaling was explained. Each participant was provided with a journal (Appendix E) to record between four and six experiences of their own participation in the ECCE setting. How to record in the journal was discussed and parents were encouraged to ask any questions or raise concerns about the journals. Journals are a good way to record personal thoughts and experiences, whilst also being able to offer insights into these experiences (Lowe et.al., 2013). Information on how to complete the journal was provided, with a template that offered prompts for the parents to complete, evidencing how they personally interact and participate within the setting. The intention of the journals was to create evidence of parents' practical and ongoing experiences of participation in the ECCE centre. A space was included for parents to share ideas and thoughts that may not have been part of the journaling, but they felt they wanted to share. I assured the parents that these would remain anonymous and that they must not include their names in the journal. The parents did not raise concerns about completing the journals and appeared satisfied with the time frame for submitting the journals. As the seven parents left the meeting, I was aware that they were approached by other parents in the setting to show them the journal and many private conversations occurred in the street outside the ECCE centre. The parents were asked to return the journals to me at the AI workshop, this gave them four weeks to add information to their journals. The intention was to then provide the same parents with a new journal where they reflect on four to six experiences of participation they had with the ECCE centre after the AI workshop.

When the parents handed in the journals at the workshop, I noticed most of the parents had not completed them and had provided limited information when they had written in them. There was a sense of embarrassment, and I chose not to address any potential concerns I had about the journals. I decided at this point not to ask them to complete the second set of journals, as I sensed a wariness and concern that they had let me down. Of the seven journals handed out, five were returned. Of the five returned two were blank as parents had not completed them. The information in the remaining three was fairly limited in detail. An initial read of the journals provided limited insights; however, it confirmed information shared in the semi-structured interviews. The limitations of the journals could have included language barriers with the template provided and assumptions of writing and readings skills on my part, as well as time limitations, or 'life getting in the way'.

4.4.3. Appreciative Inquiry workshop

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is based in interpreting knowledge from the organisation to act on this knowledge to transform the organisation (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001: 41).

Cooperrider et al. (2005) describe AI as "a powerful way to enable organisations, which are human constructions, to learn about their systems in a way that results in transformative change (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001:15). AI is the practice of creating transformational change within organisations (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001). AI allows for dialogue to occur that supports the development of a model for effective parent participation, relevant to the context of the ECCE centre in Lavender Hill. It is strongly rooted in a social constructivist perspective (2001:26) and is an appropriate approach to explore transforming ECCE centres into spaces that value parent participation. The AI process mirrors the action research process as there is an exploratory phase, reflection and further adaptations for further success. Authentic participation within the AI process allows for ownership of the phenomena as it is a positive approach that gives voice to the participants and redefines hierarchical power relations within the setting (Schubotz, 2020: 12).

The data collection process involves the use of the AI model known as the 4/5 Ds (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001:25) illustrated in table 4.2. Each of the phases of the AI process are evidenced in the story of the AI workshop (4.4.3.1) in this chapter. The AI process informed part of the data collection process and is facilitated by the researcher at each phase of the process.

Table 4-2 Appreciative Inquiry Process Source: Author's own construct

Appreciative Inquiry Process	Data collection process
1. **Define** the focus as parent participation in ECCE.	1. Researcher explores the understanding and implementation of parent participation in the ECCE documentation.
2. **Discover** the best of what works using semistructured interviews.	2. Researcher facilitates parents and teachers exploring their personal understanding and interpretation of how they participate within the ECCE.
3. **Dream** and create ideas of parent participation as part of a large group	3. Stakeholder investigation of potential parent participation model relevant to ECCE.
4. **Design** the parent participation model that will be used in the ECCE	4. Stakeholders create parent participation model to use within the ECCE based on shared ideas.
5. **Deliver** the parent participation model and reflect on it to further enhance ideas.	5. Reflective journaling on the efficacy of the parent participation model employed in the ECCE.

The AI was a workshop run with the parent body and staff in the Early Childhood setting in Lavender Hill with each phase of the AI being managed within the one day (Appendix F). All

the parents and staff of the setting were sent a letter explaining the purpose of the workshop, including an outline of the days planned activities. The researcher is a qualified Appreciative Inquiry practitioner and has experience hosting AI workshop specifically within school settings.

An AI (Cooperrider et.al., 2005) focuses on all stakeholders in a setting exploring what works well and what they would like to continue developing. AI is best described by Cooperrider et al. (2005:58) as a grass roots and top-down approach to building a community by relying on participation of all the stakeholders in the organisation to create rapid change. The AI provides the opportunity to collect the data in a short amount of time, embracing the subjective nature of the data on the issue at hand (Ebersöhn et al., 2013:134). Hosting the AI on one full day was a deliberate choice as the parents are single parents and childcare options had to be taken into consideration. The parents were happy to be involved for the one day which ensured engagement and participation in the workshop.

The AI encourages each stakeholder to share their personal experiences and understanding in an environment that is non-judgemental and supportive. These shared experiences are then used to develop a potential way forward for the ECD centre by creating a shared vision of how parents can continue to be active participants in the setting.

4.4.3.1. *The story of the Appreciative Inquiry workshop*

The ECCE centre was the setting of the AI workshop. Participants were comfortable in a known space, as well as allowing parents to attend to their children who were at home, if required. The tables in the classroom were put into groups of four and as participants arrived, they decided where they would like to sit.

Figure 4-2 Settling down for a day of exploration

Once all the participants were settled, an outline of the AI process was explained in general terms (Define phase). I explained how the day would run, including breaks, to check in with each other and their children who may need them. The aim of this AI was to consider 'best experiences of participating in an activity'. The aim of the discovery phase of the AI poses a meaningful question to explore what people want more of within the organisation (Cooperrider et. al., 2005). This initial AI question was used for the participants to interview each other. The

question allows the participants to explore and appreciate their own experiences based on personal social knowledge, using these positive experiences to create a new way forward (Cooperrider et.al., 2005).

The initial question was posed, and the first part of the AI process (Discovery phase) began with the participants interviewing each other. The participants partnered up with someone at their table and were given a guideline of semi-structured questions to ask each other (Appendix F). The questions they had were based on the initial question and provided an opportunity for participants to discover their best experiences, using a semi-structured interview process. We discussed the importance of being an interviewer and having an inquiring mind to avoid the process becoming a discussion. I explained that they had twenty minutes each to interview each other. Both participants took turns acting as interviewer and interviewee.

When the interview process was completed, everyone had the opportunity to write down key ideas they felt captured their partners' experience of participation. These were then shared verbally with the rest of the small group. This was an opportunity for each person to share their partner's story of participation and the participants were encouraged to tell their partner's stories with care and respect. The atmosphere in the room was one of quiet sharing and respect. Once this process was completed, each group then brainstormed words and ideas that encapsulated the experiences they had shared. The sharing of each other's story of participation reflected a level of comfort the participants had with those in their group as they were empowered to have a voice (Schubotz, 2020).

Figure 4-3 Participants interviewing each other and making notes

All ideas and thoughts were deemed relevant, discussed in the group and written down to encapsulate key words and phrases regarding personal experiences of participation. The diagrams below are the ideas of some of the groups' shared experiences and common understandings of experiences of participation. Each group then had the opportunity to talk

about their shared experiences to the whole group present. Each person was given three stickers and put these next to words that resonated the most with them about participation. This part of the AI is the beginning of the dream phase (Cooperrider et.al., 2005), where the participants start envisioning a preferred way of participating in the ECCE centre. This provided the opportunity for everyone to reflect and observe the community approach to participation and how it is valued by those in the community.
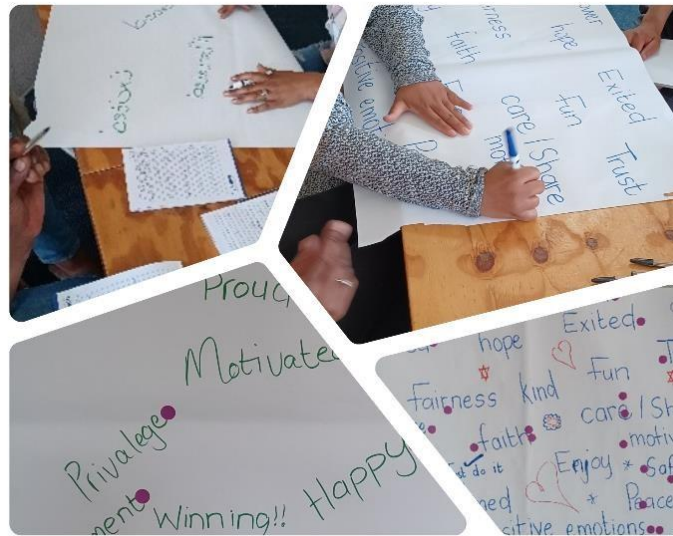
Figure 4-4 Brainstorming shared experiences of participation

After a half an hour break, each group was asked to create a visual image of their best experiences of participation as previously discussed in the group. This phase of the AI is the design of a preferred way of participating (Cooperrider et.al., 2005). The groups could create an artwork, or a song, poem, or dance to share with the wider group. At this point participation in the AI was reflective of a community of practice and dialogical approaches as there was much enthusiasm amongst each group to develop a visual representation of their best experiences. In this phase the power relations within the groups were flattened as all participants shared their ideas and felt empowered (Schubotz, 2020). The participants were deeply engaged with each other at this point, creating songs, stories, and poems to share with the wider group.

Figure 4-5 Playing with a visual representation of parent participation

Once the visual representations of participation had been shared, each group was tasked with developing a vision statement for parent participation in the setting. It is at this point of the AI (Design phase) that participants develop a preferred vison of how they will enact parent participation within the setting. Cooperrider et.al. (2005) describe this as the destiny phase. Once each group had a statement. They shared this verbally with the whole group. All the statements were then put up for everyone to read, explore and question. Using these group visions, the whole group discussed each and worked on creating one vision statement of how parent participation will occur in this one setting.
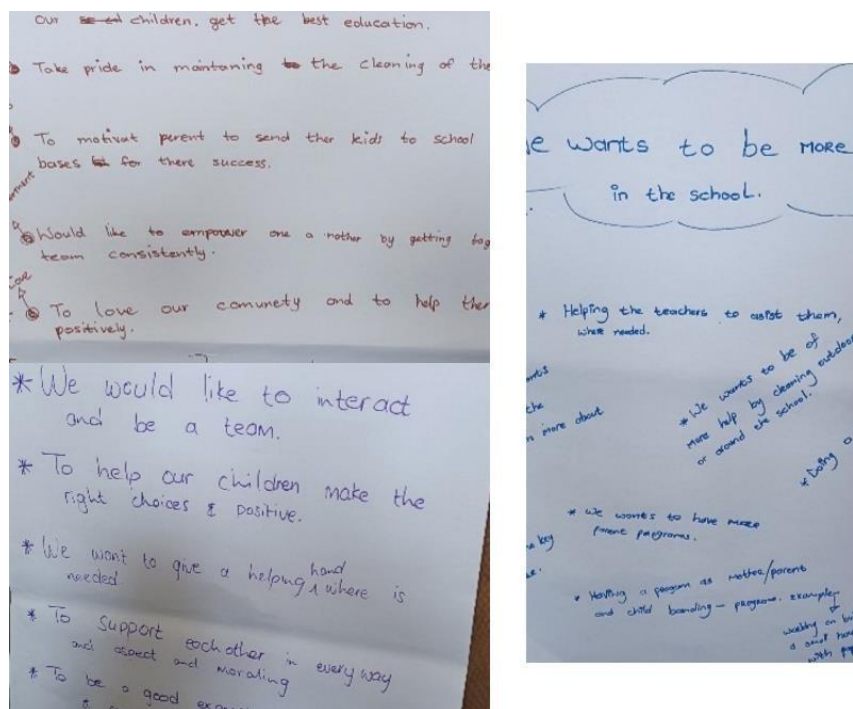
Figure 4-6 Group Visions of Participation

When agreement had been reached on how parent participation would be created and supported within the ECCE centre, all participants were asked to make personal commitments to areas of the vision they believe they would be able to uphold and take responsibility for. These individual commitments were discussed to decide how they could be practically

honoured. The day ended on a positive note with high energy as the participants left as a community of practice that had created a preferred future of parent participation within this one ECCE centre.
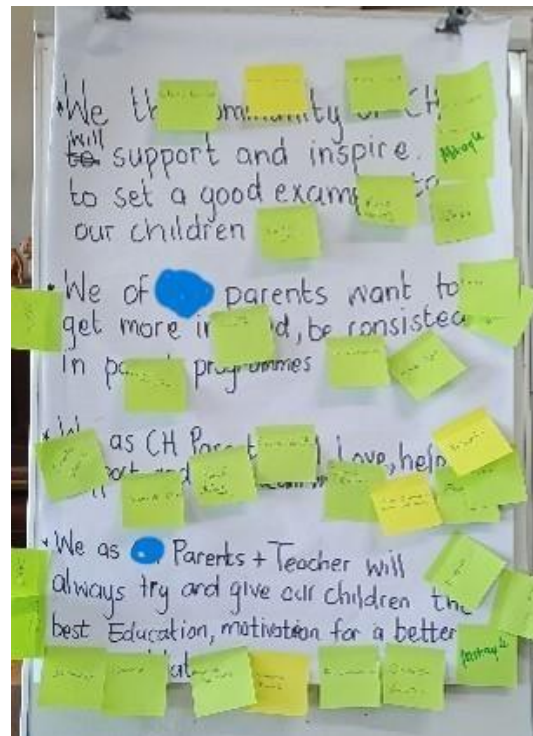
Figure 4-7 Personal Commitments to the Shared Vision

The idea that parents from deprived environments are not interested in participating in their child's ECCE setting was proved false in this particular setting (Munje & Mncube, 2018). The AI workshop provided the vehicle for storytelling based on personal experiences that could then be used to bring stakeholders together and build a supportive community (Reed, 2007). Parents engaged wholeheartedly in discussions about how they do and can participate and contribute to the life of the ECCE setting in meaningful ways. The AI workshop was evidence of how a community of shared practice occurs when a participatory pedagogy aligns with dialogic practice. The AI provided evidence that parents are eager to have opportunities to collaborate and build significant relationships with each other and the teachers in the setting. This is supported by the notion that a democratic approach values individual contributions by reducing a system of hierarchy (Freire, 1998).

When given an opportunity to participate without fear of judgement, parents happily engage in conversations and idea sharing, even when teachers are present. Listening to the shared ideas and experiences is key to relationship building within the ECCE setting. The AI provided an experience where, regardless of socio-economic status, parents showed they want to feel valued and needed as part of the ECCE setting.

The AI was a powerful tool to use to encourage personal agency through engagement with questions and discussions (Reed, 2007), allowing for the parents to understand the value they have within the ECCE setting as a form of community building. The workshop allowed the parents to connect with each other, as well as learn from each other through the sharing of

lived experiences (Reed, 2007). There was an air of interest and enjoyment throughout the workshop, with parents and teachers seemingly enjoying sharing experiences and laughter.

The AI can be described as democracy in action as it is collaborative and inclusive by nature (Reed, 2007). Parents who may feel marginalised by broader society and undervalued as mothers in their own community shared openly and honestly. They connected with each other on a personal level and interacted with the teachers in the setting with ease. The AI allowed each parent to feel heard by valuing their experiences and understanding. This supports Freire's (2017) idea of people working together to create change by co-constructing new possibilities (Reed, 2007).

As the day progressed, a depth of honest communication and reflection occurred amongst the participants. As the researcher, I was intrigued by the level of engagement within this essentially marginalised community as assumptions exist about parent not being interested in meaningful conversations (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Janssen et.al., 2012; Yosso, 2005). The conversations and participation in each aspect of the AI provides evidence of the desire for parents in areas of low SES to contribute meaningfully to their child's ECCE setting. This desire can have a ripple effect into the wider community by encouraging participation in all aspects of the community.

4.4.4. School Documents

Documents and policies can offer insights into the intentions of an organisation by providing insight into ideas that may have been inaccessible to the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007). Examining policy documents is the opportunity to consider how power operates within the space and how this impacts the setting (Mueller & File, 2016). Policy documents are often perceived as having authority and credibility (Mukherji & Albon, 2015). They also provide evidence of the operational approach of the setting (Cohen et.al., 2007). However, policy is open to interpretation by the reader and assumes parents have taken the time to read and understand the various policy documents. In analysing documents, it is important to explore how the policy was created and then how it is used and interpreted (Mueller & File, 2016).

Parents are encouraged to participate in decision-making within the setting to support teachers and work as a community (South Africa, 2016). The South African Schools Act (South Africa, 2011) recommends centres create a list of policies and protocols that inform parents and staff of best operating procedures. These documents inform practice and align with the ethos and vision the setting aims to create. The policies are made available to parents and centres are encouraged to review policies annually. In this setting the policy documents set the tone for how parents are encouraged to participate in the life of the setting, laying out the expectations for parent participation, providing clear guidance on opportunities to support the ECCE centre.

4.4.4.1. The story of the school documents

The ECCE centre shared all the schools' documents and procedures with me. I appreciated their willingness to share these documents. The benefit of having the school documents is that I could interpret them without input from the participants (Hodder, 2003). After an initial read through the documents, I separated out the school documents that addressed parent participation in the setting. There were three sets of school documents to analyse: the Parent Handbook (Lavender Hill ECCE, 2022), the Staff Handbook (Lavender Hill ECCE, 2022) and the Vision and Mission of the setting (Lavender Hill ECCE, 2022). The school's policy documents were created by the NGO in collaboration with the teachers and consultation with other ECCE settings for guidance.

After reading and rereading all the school documents, I approached the principal to review and clarify my understanding and interpretation of the content of the staff handbook, the parent handbook and the mission of the ECCE centre as well as the expectations set down for the staff and parents as part of the setting. I learnt that the school documents were not created in consultation with the parents, but rather by asking other settings what policies they have and make use of. The collaboration when creating the school documents appears to have been with other ECCE centres and other settings. Conversations with the principal to clarify ideas presented in the policy documents also provided her the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the documents (Freire, 1998). The NGO that initially established the ECCE centre also had a hand in the creation of the documents and policies to ultimately reflect the ethos of the pedagogical approach. Protocols were established to enhance the experiences the children and parents have within the setting to better support the children and families in the community. The documents were a mixture of generic ideas one would expect from an ECCE centre or school and there were also aspects that spoke to the pedagogy of this ECCE centre.

4.4.5. Data Analysis

Analysis of the data creates a detailed description of the topic (Creswell, 2013:185). The data collected include the ECCE centre documentation on parent participation, the semi-structured interviews, the reflective journals and the AI workshop. Each of the datasets were analysed separately allowing a variety of themes to emerge. Data Corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006:8) includes all the data collected using the data collection tools discussed. Using Braun and Clarke's (2024) six-step reflexive Thematic Analysis, I identified codes and patterns in the data to generate themes. This process is flexible, enabling me to use both inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis. Inductive analysis develops themes by making meaning of the data at a semantic level, whilst deductive analysis allows me to make links to the theoretical framework of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2024) .

Inductive analysis will allow me to interpret the data by examining the underlying ideas presented by the participants regarding parent participation in their specific context. The six-step recursive process of reflexive thematic analysis allows me to move back and forth

between the dataset, the codes created and the potential themes exploring links to the theoretical framework and the literature.

Knowledge and understanding of parent participation from the semi-structured interviews were used in the development of the exploratory questions in the AI. The information and outlooks of all participating stakeholders created during the process of the AI was used to guide the development of the parent participation model, alongside the themes that have emerged through the semi-structured interviews, reflective journals and ECCE centre document analysis.

Analysing the data corpus and creating one dataset ensured I kept the stories of the participants at the centre of the analytical process. This supports the dialogic approach of the research with the view of the participants as agentic in Lavender Hill. The analysis reflects the voices of the participants who have knowledge and experience that informs their opportunity to have influence on their lived experiences. I further checked in with the participants to share my analysis of their experiences and understanding.

4.4.6. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

As an approach to data analysis Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) provides the opportunity to listen to and include the voices of the participants in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2024). This naturally aligns with the theoretical perspectives of this research, where a humanising pedagogy is at the forefront of developing a potential model for parent participation.

As mentioned, RTA is a flexible approach to data analysis as it can be used both inductively to explore the rich data produced through the research, as well as deductively to make links to the theoretical aspects of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Approaches to qualitative research include a Small q or Big Q approach (Kidder & Fine, 1987), based on whether the analysis used a narrow and limited view of data collection and analysis which is highly structured, Small q; or whether the approach towards data collection and analysis is reflective and varied with a more natural approach, Big Q. Big Q (Terry et al., 2017) views data analysis as being flexible and organic where the researcher produces themes based on their own skills and the data set, based on personal and conceptual standpoints. In this research the approach towards data analysis has leaned towards Big Q qualitative research, as I generated themes combining the data corpus into one data set, moving between each data set naturally developing codes and themes. Braun and Clarke (2024:387) renamed Big Q as RTA, where the researcher is an active participant in the generation of codes and themes. The subjective nature of the researcher is not considered a challenge to the objectivity and reliability of the findings but is rather acknowledged as a resource that enables codes and themes to occur organically. RTA also provided the opportunity for flexibility in the generation

of codes and themes when interpreting and analysing the data both inductively and deductively (Braun & Clarke, 2024:389).

RTA allows for an approach that is both inductive, making use of the data and deductive, using a theoretical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2024). This is a useful approach to being able to be theoretical and atheoretical in the process of analysis for theme generation. My analysis focused on both semantic and latent features of the data to consider both what the participants said (i.e. content and meaning) and how they said it (i.e. language use). Using an inductive analytic approach helped with the initial generation of codes from the data. These codes are then used to develop themes and sub themes.

Guidance on how to employ RTA involves six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2024): data familiarisation, where the researcher immerses themselves in the data and becomes familiar with all the data; coding, which involves the ability to read the data to make meaning linked to the research questions and aims; initial theme generation, which gives the researcher the opportunity to explore common patterns and shared meaning of the topic of research; reviewing of the themes, providing the researcher the opportunity to make connections between meaningful patterns in the dataset to be able to tell the story; defining and naming the themes, where the definitions of each theme capture the key concepts of the theme; and writing the final report, where the researcher tells the story of each theme using the data and the existing knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2024). This is not suggested as a formula to follow without thought, but rather as a guide to approaching data analysis. How the RTA occurs is related to the theoretical approach of the research, as well as being 'thoughtful, active and sometimes recursive' (Braun & Clarke, 2024:390). As RTA is not a linear approach, it provides the opportunity to move between the six phases of data analysis to explore patterns across the data (Terry et.al., 2017). Each of the six phases are outlined and will be elaborated on, using the data in the findings in Chapter 6.

The process of developing codes and themes requires some form of quality control (Guest et al., 2012:134). This was done for each data set. The transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were reviewed by listening to the recordings with the transcripts to ensure accuracy of transcription. A generic template for the journals with space for each journal entry ensured the participants had clear information on what they could reflect on in terms of their individual participation in the ECCE centre. During the AI workshop the participants were asked to document aspects of ideas they were working in, whether in groups or in pairs and all these documents were collected at the end of the workshop day for data analysis. I also ensured that all accounts of participants were represented through direct quotes to represent a range of experiences and accounts. Doing this assisted me ensure the theoretical approach to this research was present in the data collection and analysis.

The datasets were coded by employing an inductive approach, using the data to construct meaning and develop theories of parent participation (Merriam, 2015:15). Employing an

inductive approach encourages the researcher to develop themes based on the data content, using the participants' own experiences to capture the reality of their lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 20242:9). The codes and themes created provide insights of participants' views on parental involvement and partnership in the ECCE setting. After the first round of coding of all the transcripts and documents, codes were organized into themes.

Multiple sources of data enabled me to cross-check and triangulate the data (Merriam, 2015:213). To ensure validity and reliability, the coding procedures and coding scheme were discussed with my supervisors to ensure the results of the various data collection tools was an accurate reflection of parent participation as perceived by the participants (Henn et al., 2014:207).

4.5. Unpacking the Data

Once all the data was collected, I initially worked with each set of data individually. I immersed myself in each set of data to familiarise myself with the implications and understanding of the lived experiences of participation from the participants perspective. This approach enabled me to work together with the participants and provide agency (Kamberelis et. al., 2018). My aim was to ensure the voices of the participants were at the forefront when developing codes, themes and sub-themes. This approach to the data aligns with the theoretical framework of this research and is utilised to support the voices of the participants. The process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024) ensured I moved between the data sets to create a narrative overview of understandings and experiences of parent participation, which in turn supports the development of a model of parent participation. Ontologically the themes are created on the assumption that there are multiple truths, and that reality is based on socially constructed ideas based in language (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Epistemologically the approach to the data analysis is embedded in constructionism as I make sense of individual and group accounts of understandings of parent participation, based on cultural practices (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Four sets of data often felt clumsy and messy. I decided to embrace 'the mess' of data analysis (Cook, 2009) as an opportunity to construct a new approach to knowing what parent participation could become, instead of sitting comfortably in recreating what is already known. The mess of data represents the interconnectedness of the research, as well as representing Freire's desire for a move away from neoliberal ideals to accepting the notion of everything that is socially constructed is definite and inevitable (Freire, 2001:22). I made use of the multiple viewpoints across the data to reflect and find new meanings to existing ideas of parent participation (Cook, 2009). This approach also ensured I brought the participants voice to the fore by seeing other perspectives to bring about change (Kamberelis et.al., 2018).

4.6.1. Familiarising myself with the Data

I immersed myself in the four data sets to become familiar with the information the participants provided (Braun & Clarke, 2024). To ensure that the voice of all participants was represented, I ensured I engaged with all sources of data to develop an overview of parent participation from their experiences and understanding. My intention was to give adequate attention to each source, fully engaging with the detail and information provided. This approach helped me question what knowledge already exists within the ECCE centre and what aspects could still be considered (Mueller & File, 2016). I found this straight forward to do with the semi-structured interviews and the AI as this was where I found the depth of information was held. The journals proved to be less forthcoming, and I extracted everything I could from them. I wanted to ensure I was not making assumptions about the limited information shared in the journals and was able to see a correlation between the journals and the semi-structured interviews. The school documents had much detail around expectations for parent participation which made analysis straightforward. However, I remained aware of policy documents being good in theory, but possibly not being evident in the daily practice of the ECCE centre. Early semantic analysis of the data allowed me to focus on what the participants said at a surface level. At a later stage I captured the implicit meanings, ideas and concepts using the theoretical framework and the research questions (Terry et.al., 2017).

4.6.1.1. Spending time with the semi-structured interviews

To become comfortable and familiar with the interviews, I started by listening to the recordings of the interview's multiple times. I listened to the answers to questions and the individual stories told around personal experiences of participation. My intention was to make sure I had a sense of the world from the participants perspective with no judgment (Fontana & Frey, 2003). I took the opportunity to create summaries of the interviews into a story format for my own understanding. I found this process valuable as some of the participants had answered questions in Afrikaans and I had the time to make sure I was confident with what I was hearing on the recordings. To ensure there was a shared understanding, I went back and asked two participants in the interviews to clarify ideas they had shared as they had spoken in Afrikaans. I wanted to ensure I had understood their answers correctly (Fontana & Frey, 2003). Once the semi-structured interviews were transcribed, I was able to listen to the recordings and read the interviews simultaneously. I then read and reread the transcriptions, absorbing myself in the information. This process helped immerse me in the voices of the participants. I highlighted key ideas that presented themselves in each of the interviews. I used these detailed accounts to work on the themes and codes.

4.6.1.2. Delving into the journal entries

Effective journaling is a skill, and the intention was that the template provided would support the parents in their journaling (Lowe et.al., 2013). As mentioned, the journal entries were limited and initially I considered not making use of them as part of the data collection. On

reflection I realised that the journals are evidence of how the theory of parent participation is connected to what occurs in practice (Lowe et.al., 2013). I read and reread the limited entries, looking for these connections. Although limited, I realised that the parents who had completed the entries had provided insight into how they value and experience their participation in the setting. The entries provided validity to the ideas they had shared in the semi-structured interviews. I was able to group similar ideas and experiences of parent participation to generate common codes in the reflexive thematic analysis.

4.6.1.3.   *Getting to grips with the Appreciative Inquiry*

The AI was the fertile ground for exploring parent participation. As discussed earlier, the level of participant interaction and engagement surprised me, and it was valuable to see the ideas shared being evidence of the value of dialogic participation within in a community. The power of the AI lies in the opportunity to co-construct opportunities for change (Reed, 2007). The AI generated a depth of detail and information which I was able to use in the development of codes and themes. To do this, I read and reread each document that the groups had created; starting with their shared experiences of participation; moving onto their scattergrams and the presentations they did to evidence how they perceive participation. I was also conscious of making sure the voice of the participants, both individually and as a group, were heard (Reed, 2007). I had recorded the group presentations and watched those, making note of key words and phrases used by the participants. I reviewed the words and ideas participants shared, grouping common ideas and experiences to create codes. The intention is to use this data to create change through social connections and creating something together (Cooperrider et.al., 2005).

4.6.1.4.   *Developing an understanding of the existing policy documents*

The ECCE centre has three sets of documents, a Parent Handbook (Lavender Hill ECCE, 2022), a Staff Handbook (Lavender Hill ECCE, 2022) and general policies and procedures (Lavender Hill ECCE, 2022). Each document provides guidance on how to support and interact with parents to encourage engagement and participation in the setting. As I read the documents, I highlighted any mention of parent participation and the role of parents and teachers. I read through all the documents to ensure I had a clear overview of the expectations of both parents and teachers in the setting. The challenge of policy documents is that there can be many interpretations of what is written (Hodder, 2003). To check my personal understanding of what I was reading, I met with the principal to clarify some ideas in the documents to ensure my interpretation matched the intention of the documents. I highlighted ideas in all three documents and found some overlap of thought with the school documents. Again, I then sorted and coded the similar ideas accordingly.

4.6.2.   **Merging the Data**

Once I had worked with each data set coding them individually, I merged the four data sets into a data corpus following the procedures of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Braun and Clarke

(2024:8) upfront the fact that RTA uses researcher subjectivity as a tool with the implication that analysis and interpretation may not always be accurate or objective. Initially I found merging the data sets clumsy and this is when I embraced the mess and chaos of research, as suggested by Cook (2009). This approach also provided the opportunity to be reflexive with the thematic analysis as I moved between all the data to develop codes and then themes. In the development of the codes, themes and sub-themes, I was conscious of ensuring the participants voice was at the forefront of the findings. I made the time to share potential codes and themes with the participants to ensure they were connected to the process and could contribute and relate to the process I was employing to reflect their personal understandings of parent participation. This approach conforms with the approach of the theoretical framework of this research to utilise and support the voices of the participants.

Using an inductive approach encouraged me to develop themes based on the data content using the participants' own experiences to capture the reality of their lived experiences and understanding of parent participation (Braun & Clarke, 2024:9).

4.6.3.   Coding the Data

Braun and Clarke (2024) describe coding as the process of engaging with the data systematically. Coding is influenced by the researcher's positionality and should be flexible to allow for codes to be refined and revised for clarity (Terry et.al., 2017). Coding was done manually, without the help of software tools, to be authentic to the voices of the participants in the research. Creating the codes manually ensured a constant reading and rereading of the data to interpret the words of the participants. Braun and Clarke (2024) assert that this flexible and reflexive approach supports the development of patterns of meaning. This approach also aligns with ensuring participant voice and agency remains within the data findings. RTA also uses researcher subjectivity as a tool with the implication that analysis and interpretation may not always be accurate or objective (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The process of coding meant I worked systematically through the data corpus looking for areas of interest that made links to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The codes provided insights of participants' views on parental involvement and participation in the ECCE setting. After the first round of coding all the transcripts and documents, codes were organised into themes.

4.6.4.   Reviewing and Developing Potential Themes

The themes were created by looking at shared patterns of meaning amongst the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2024). I became aware of the 'clumsiness' of multiple themes and on reflection explored the possibility of creating sub-themes which could then create major theme areas.

The coding procedures and theme developments were discussed and reviewed with my supervisors. These discussions encouraged reflection on codes and themes created, ensuring depth of analysis of each dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The discussions also provided the opportunity for me to reflect on my understanding of the datasets as I explained how the codes and themes had been developed.

I presented the themes to the parents and teachers who had participated in the semistructured interviews to ensure they felt I had captured their voices. The few cases where disagreements on coding and theme development occurred were discussed until clarity and agreement was reached. The process of developing and reviewing the themes provided the opportunity to assess whether the themes made sense and where they could be merged or reduced (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

4.6.5. Settling on Key Themes and Sub-themes

Employing RTA provided me with a process I could follow to ensure all the data was mined to generate the themes for the research. When working with the data corpus I created a table to keep control of how I made use of the codes to generate themes and sub themes (Figure 4.8). I ensured that the codes and themes addressed the research questions and objectives. This process allowed me to fine tune the analysis to provide clarity for each theme and the story it tells (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Due to the multiple data sets, it was a challenge at times to create an overall sense of the key ideas' participants had shared. In the process of data analysis, I found common phrases and ideas being shared or alluded to and worked on moving these ideas together to create an overall theme using words that best describe these individual phrases. Braun and Clarke (2024) indicate that this process is not linear, as it is inductive whilst giving voice to the participants stories from the researcher's perspective. Figure 4.9 represents one of the many iterations of moving ideas and codes around to align common ideas and thoughts from the data.

Semi-structured interviews	Appreciative Inquiry	School documents	Journals
• how to get involved	• work together	• community	• parent meetings
• barriers	• take pride	• partnership	• helping at school
• benefits of being involved	• love the community	• parent contribution	• speak up
• survival	• be positive	• parent/school contact	• time to help
• positive approach	• come together weekly	• positive interactions	• feel part of the school
• safe	• support from teachers	• postive role model	• a big difference to be involved
• support at home	• parent programmes	• relationship builidng	
• approachable	• involved in classroom	• supportive home environment	
• community benefits	• team work	• code of conduct	
• being the change	• part of daily activities		
• supportive community	• show appreciation		
• parent agency	• interactions		
• impact on the child	• share ideas		
• open communication	• have a voice		
• some limitations	• support		
• school as supportive	• feel valued		
• better opportunities	• trust		
• involvement =opportunity			
• invovlement as important			
• parent training			
• relationships			
• interactions			
• ownership			
• know the parents			
• parents response important			
• trust			
• understanding			
• responsibilities			
• approachable			

Figure 4-8 Generating the initial codes

Figure 4-9 Manipulating the Codes for Clarity

To create the sub-themes, I considered words that best described the initial codes. I then grouped the sub-themes into three key themes to create clarity. Each key theme had a central concept that helped clarify the codes and organise sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Once the key themes and sub-themes were developed and cohesive, I created Table 4.3 to provide an overview of the themes from the merged datasets of the research. These themes will be explored and expanded on in Chapter 5 by offering a synopsis of each key theme and subtheme as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2024).

Table 4-3 Key Themes and Sub-themes

Key research question	Related objectives	Initial themes	Final **key themes** and sub themes
What understandings exist in the setting about parent participation?	Developing insight into personal understanding of what parent participation is.	Helping out Speaking up Understanding the school Supporting each other Open communication	**Connected** Relationship Support Community Collaboration
What experiences exist in the ECCE centre to support parent participation?	Exploring how parents participate and what teachers do to encourage participation	Parent meetings Parent contributions Ongoing interactions Parent training Workshops Gardening Supportive school Working together	
What policies and procedures support parent participation?	Inquire into policies and protocols that encourage parent participation	Building a community Nurturing relationships Positive interactions	**Empowered** Beliefs/perceptions Educated Involved
What value do participants place on parent participation?	Understanding how participation is valued based on personal experiences	Time Support Trust Ownership of the space Sense of responsibility Feeling safe Impacts how the children feel.	**Reflected** Benefits challenges

4.6.   Trustworthiness

Multiple sources of data collection will strengthen the trustworthiness of this study (Nieuwenhuis, 2013: 80). In this research the participants were included in reviewing the data collected. Their ideas and opinions are valued as part of the AI and the creation of a model of parent participation. Engaging in dialogue and reviewing the data with the participants ensured trustworthiness as all the sources of data reflects their lived experiences. Once themes were generated, I met with the four teachers and the parents who had participated both in the semistructured interviews, and the AI workshop, to gain their views on the themes and to

ensure their voices were included in the research as part of the democratic approach towards this growing community of practice (Robert-Holmes, 2018). The inclusion of their voices is a valuable contribution to the trustworthiness of the research as the participants validate my interpretation of their experiences (Willig, 2017).

4.7. Positionality

As the researcher, I have a general knowledge of the area of Lavender Hill as the setting which the research is based as I am involved in the training of ECCE teachers and assistants. I am aware that my relationship with the NGO may influence how the participants view my interest in their ECCE centre. To this end, I clarified my role as researcher. I have developed a basic understanding of the challenges ECCE centres face within the Lavender Hill community, but I do not have in-depth knowledge of the participating centre, even though I have met the principal and teachers. I was aware of the idea that I may be viewed as an outsider and an 'expert' and I made sure that I create a sense of equality to encourage collaboration and the inclusion of all voices (Reed, 2007: 82).

4.8. Ethical Considerations

Researchers are not impartial and distanced from the research they do (Osgood, 2023). It is my duty, as the researcher, to be aware of the factors that may influence the research. These include the ethics of being aware of the setting of the research and how the social and moral behaviour of this setting may influence the participants and the researcher. Ethical values were at the forefront of this research as the community is sensitive to feeling judged and criticised and I wanted to ensure that their safety was ensured throughout the research process (Bolshaw & Josephidou, 2018). As the researcher, I was attuned to potential power imbalances by reflecting on what I was doing and how I was interacting with all the participants (Robert-Holmes, 2018).

The AI process aligns with participatory research where the boundaries between the participants and the research may be blurred resulting in ethical issues where anonymity and confidentiality of shared data is not possible (Schubotz, 2020:70). Supporting an ethical approach to research the AI does not impose anything on the participants. The participants are encouraged to influence decisions and to create change. They can experiment and make changes as desired (Reed, 2007:54). In low SES communities this approach is more likely to support empowerment which leads to a better understanding of the community needs (Schubotz, 2020: 60). Due to the participatory nature of the data collection, it was important to have a heightened understanding of ethical responsibilities that included being open to working as a community through relationship to explore the world of the participants with respect (Osgood, 2023). Bringing individual thoughts and ideas together strengthens the community and 'open dialogue is conducted with an ethics of care', knowing that we affect each other (Latto et.al., 2022).

Ethical clearance was obtained through Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) Ethics committee. All the participants consented to being part of the research. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants was ensured and respected. Participants were not coerced and were free to withdraw from the study at any point.

4.9.   Limitations of the Research

Limitations in research may be considered a weakness influencing the research (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). In this research using only one site may be a limitation as the data collection is based on one set of experiences. It was endeavoured to have at least twelve parents for the semi-structured interviews to ensure I had a range of voices on personal experiences. On the days set aside for the semi-structured interviews seven parents arrived for the one-on-one interview sessions. During the interview process some parents were more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue, Afrikaans. When it came to writing in the journals the limited information may have been due to it not being presented in Afrikaans, making the parents uncomfortable sharing their experiences in English. To ensure there was engagement in the AI workshop a discussion on the potential limitations of open conversations was addressed by ensuring the parents knew that the teachers and principal were committed to working with the community, and were viewed as equals, exchanging ideas and experiences, not leaders during the workshop (Schubotz, 2020:149). When exploring the importance of the policies within the setting I was aware that there was no clear information provided by the DBE on parent participation as they had only recently included Early Childhood Development into their portfolio. Once the function shift from the Department of Social Development has occurred, I will collect data from Department of Basic Education to strengthen the study.

4.10.   Chapter Summary

Reflexive thematic analysis supported the process of exploring shared stories and experiences to develop an understanding of the participants' perceptions of parent participation. I was also able to upfront the voices of the participants by presenting their stories through the development of the themes. The inductive approach and the theoretical framework of this research both support the notion of the importance of presenting the voices of the participants. The multiple processes of data collection were specifically chosen and employed to support the development of a parent participation model that is democratic, building a true sense of community. The findings and discussion will tell the story of this ECCE centre's approach to parent participation and how this can be used to co-create a model of parent participation based on open discussions through a collaborative process that is supported by the community of practice within the centre.

Chapter 5 Findings and discussion

5.1.   Introduction

The findings provide the opportunity to explore the outcomes of the data by using both the analytical framework of RTA alongside the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3, using the literature and the theoretical frameworks. As discussed in Chapter Two, personal agency through dialogue is the core of strengthening parent participation. Supporting the development of voice through democratic practice using a collaborative approach supports the concept of a community of practice building on the notion of ubuntu, as discussed in chapter two.

This chapter will upfront the voices of the participants in the research, making use of literature, the theoretical and the conceptual framework to support or challenge ideas presented. This process is reflexive and iterative, supporting the co-construction of a model of parent participation, by moving between the various datasets, the theoretical and conceptual framework and literature.

5.2.   Themes

As discussed in Chapter 4, the data was merged into a data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which enabled me to develop an overview of how parents and teachers in this one setting understand and experience parent participation. Combining the data collected through semistructured interviews, journaling, the AI and documentary analysis of the school documents provided a depth of insight into parent participation. Once the themes were explored and cohesive, I was able to develop key themes creating a table to provide an overview of the key themes and sub themes created by merging the datasets of the research.

The three key themes generated from the data are: *Participation as connection*, *Participation as empowering* and *Reflecting on participation*. Each of these key themes, along with the relevant subthemes illustrated in Figure 5.1, will be discussed in Chapter 6 answering the research questions posed.
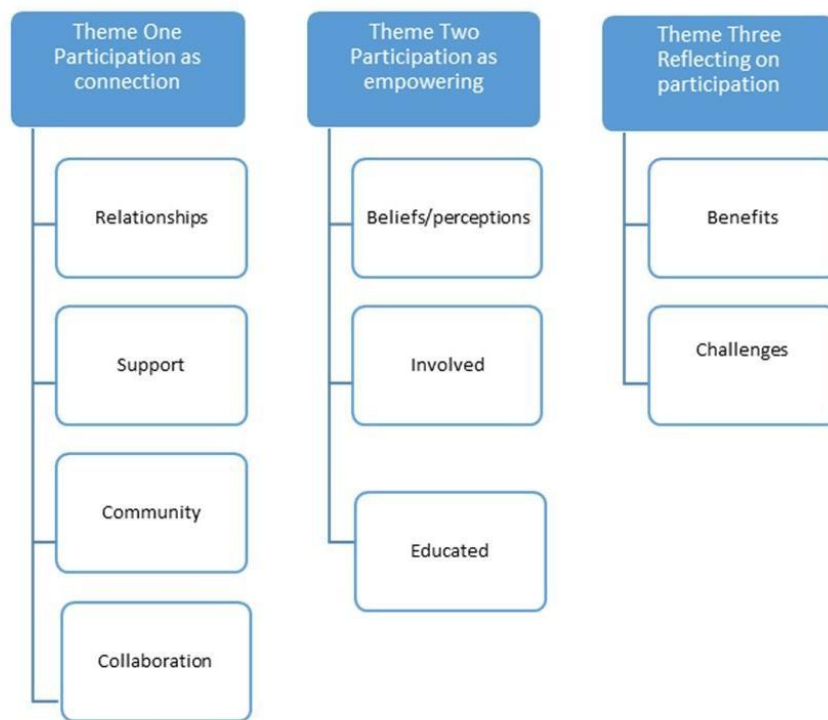
Figure 5-1 Key Themes and Sub-themes

5.2.1. Key Themes

Participation as connection focuses on the research questions which explore understandings of parent participation by the parents and the teachers in the setting. This highlighted the theories of humanising pedagogy based on relationship building through open communication (Freire 1998, 2005). Connection also encourages participants to work as a community sharing the knowledge whilst learning with and from each other (Wenger, 2010).

Participation as empowering provides insight into how the understanding of parent participation is implemented in practice. This includes looking at how the parents participate and how the teachers support parent participation. Alongside this the beliefs and perceptions of parent participation are explored as these can encourage or discourage learning from each other and learning together as a community of practice. Individual beliefs regarding participation also influence individual agency in the co-construction of meaningful dialogue and equity of voice in the setting (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012).

Reflecting on participation addresses how the setting maintains genuine participation through ongoing reflection and discussion with the parents using a democratic stance as suggested by Freire (1998) to ensure a humanising pedagogy for relationship building. Reflection is a vital aspect of considering what is working well and where improvements and changes can be made to improve participation. The themes naturally draw on the theoretical and conceptual framework (Chapter 3) and literature explored in Chapter 2. The focus is on building a socially cohesive community based on the principles of ubuntu that operates democratically through the acknowledgment of individual experiences and skills that are

valued through dialogue and sharing common goals and interests (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012; Wenger, 2010; Freire, 2005).

There is a correlation between the ideas expressed in the data and the analytical framework developed through the literature, theoretical and conceptual framework presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Braun and Clarke (2024:8) include 'data analysis being underpinned by theoretical assumptions' as one of the core assumptions of reflexive thematic analysis. The themes reflect the understandings and experiences the participants have of participation. These themes also indicate the opportunity for the community to co-construct a model of parent participation pertinent to their ECCE centre. Ideally the development of a site-specific model creates social cohesion aligned with democratic values and communities of practice, using a dialogical approach to communication between the ECCE centre and the parents.

As the four data sets were merged into a data corpus, to create clarity in the discussion I have created abbreviations for the data used to identify where the information was located. To ensure anonymity, parent and teacher interviews and the parent journals are numbered. The data from the AI was created by groups of participants and the AI group data was collated into one data set. For ease of reading the data was abbreviated (table 5-1) and in the analysis the numbers are allocated to the participants to ensure anonymity, e.g. PI 3 refers to parent interview 3.

Table 5-1 Data Abbreviations

Parent Interviews	PI
Journals	J
Teacher Interviews	TI
School Documents	SD
Appreciative Inquiry	AI

5.2.2. Theme One: Participation as Connection. 'A child's education is not the schools alone.'

Theme One provides insight into how the participants understand and experience participation as the opportunity to create connection, demonstrated in Figure 5.2.
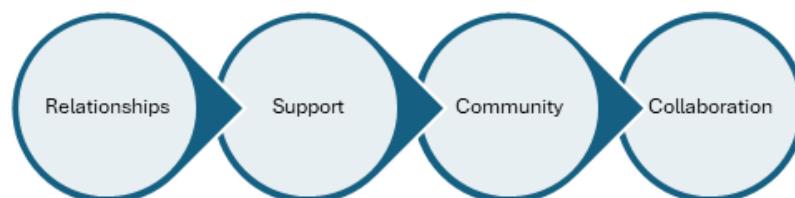
Figure 5-2 Connection: Sub-themes

Providing the opportunity for significant connections relies on building relationships and offering support in a way that allows for collaboration and community building. These are

considered valuable in support of the children with an awareness of how these connections are created and maintained. Important connections are created when there is a common ethos and approach to learning and teaching by the parents and the teachers. Connections are also ensured when people speak with each other and not to each other (Freire, 1998:63). Creating the opportunity for connections includes valuing the social and cultural capital of the parents in the setting (Collins et.al., 2023:95). Establishing the ethos of the setting and developing a sense of understanding with the parents relies on the necessity to build trust through clear, open communication.

When the teachers and the parents work together, the connections they create support the best interests of the children. Developing a community of practice through participation supports developing connections in the ECCE centre through social learning (Engström, 2007:47). The ECCE documents describe the need for supporting the children being the work of the parents and teachers together as '*a child's education is not the schools alone'.*

The setting has the task of helping parents see the opportunities they have around them to make connections, between home and the setting, for themselves and for their children (Nutbrown & Cook, 2023:63). Creating these connections takes place when the teachers share their knowledge of what is taking place in the setting with the parents as well as taking the time to listen to the parents share experiences they have at home and in the community. Developing connections helps parents feel connected and confident about what their child is involved with during the day in the setting (Twala, 2021).

Participation as connection occurs through building relationships that are supportive and value the contributions each person makes to the community through collaboration. The expression of the need for connection was varied in nature and understanding depending on personal experiences and beliefs. Merging the dataset of the research provided a distinct overview of the ways in which these connections are fostered and maintained. The analysis provided here will explore how strong connections became evident within the community when those who live around the ECCE centre are encouraged to participate in events hosted by the centre. Involving the community around the ECCE centre also supports community building which can create social cohesion.

Connections amongst parents and the ECCE centre are an important aspect of building a community of practice. Sustainable connections occur when awareness of family's beliefs, structures and wellbeing are recognised and taken into consideration when building the community within the setting (Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019; Cox-Petersen, 2011; Hiatt-Michael, 2005). This ECCE centre prides itself on making an impact within the local community by offering events and opportunities that encourage both the immediate community of the setting and the wider community. These events and interactions help support a sense of belonging and the opportunity to contribute to the centre and the environment surrounding the centre, which is where many of the families in the centre come from. In offering events the teachers

in the setting also create the opportunity to connect with and learn about the families in the setting on a personal level. To create connections between the parents and the centres, it is important that the two groups engage and learn about each other (Boyle et.al., 2018). Relationship building is at the heart of creating meaningful connections. Making connections through relationship building takes time as it may not be a daily occurrence, but once established can support strong and meaningful connections (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022; Uitto et.al., 2021).

The participants in the research expressed the importance of connection between the ECCE centre and the parents. This expression of the need for connection was varied in nature and understanding depending on personal experiences and beliefs. The principal and the teachers expressed their interest in having parents participate meaningfully within the ECCE centre as this aligns with the pedagogical approach of the setting. As a staff they value the importance of parent participation and take the time to connect with parents within the community, making home visits and supporting families as required. Merging the dataset of the research provided a distinct overview of the ways in which these connections are fostered and maintained. There was agreement that having strong connections became evident within the community when those who live around the ECCE centre are encouraged to participate in events hosted by the centre. Involving the community around the ECCE centre also supports community building which can create social cohesion.

5.2.2.1. *Relationship*

The core of building a connected community is the opportunity to develop significant relationships. These relationships need to be created as equal, where trust and understanding are at the centre, hopefully created through communication that provides equality. Being aware of the micropolitics that exist within the parent-teacher relationships is fundamental in breaking down potential power imbalances (Uitto et.al., 2021; Bangura, 2005; Freire, 2005). Awareness of potential power imbalances were mentioned by one of the teachers.

> *[TI 3] Sometimes you [the teacher] need to initiate that conversation because the parents' 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.*

Remarkably, none of the parents interviewed spoke about insecurity around approaching the teachers. One parent stated firmly,

> *[PI 2] 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. We have open communication.*

Whilst other parents feel equally comfortable approaching the teachers,

[PI 4] *According to me if there's problems you can talk to them. There is always [a teacher] out of the school… yeah chat maybe in the morning when you bring your child to school.*

The parents' apparent comfort at being able to approach the teachers is likely to have occurred as the teachers have created and maintained a space where the parents do not feel threatened or intimidated (Uitto et.al., 2021; Baxter & Kilderry, 2021; Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019). Building a trusting relationship helps teachers and parents approach each other easily developing personal connections and providing feedback about what is happening in the setting (Bettencourt et.al., 2020).

Collins et al. (2023:102) clarify that 'trust is an important element in any relationship' and is needed to create equal relationships between the school and the family. Building trust requires all stakeholders in the setting to caution against stereotyping each other, as this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021; Bettencourt et.al., 2020; Janssen et. al., 2012). These stereotypes include teachers assuming parents' lack of education and low socio-economic status means they are not interested in what their child does at school. The teachers in the setting want the parents to feel they can approach them,

[TI 1] *I think, 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? Uhm, yeah.*

[TI 3] *Maybe one or two parents want to find out about their child, but mostly I have to pick up a conversation with them about their child. But I know the principal does that where she have a one on one with the parents and yeah, and she tells them they must ask any question about materials and whatever they have, we have here in the* classroom*, and then we answer them.*

Although the teachers express a desire for parents to consider them approachable, there needs to be an awareness that parents make assumptions that the teachers are better than them and are not interested in the life of the child at home (Bettencourt et.al., 2020; Freire, 1998). Relationship building requires regular connections between all the stakeholders in the ECCE centre. Janssen et. al. (2012) portray trust as being created when we see others acting in a way that is beneficial to building the relationship, including having confidence in everyone's ability to contribute for the benefit of the child. Making sure there are opportunities for parents and teachers to meet and connect supports building trustful connections.

Creating consistency in the relationship between parents and teachers requires positive communication and experiences with an understanding of the cultural differences between school and home without judgement or prejudice (Janssen et al., 2012; Formosinho & Passos, 2019). Equality in relationships is created when everyone feels heard and know their voice

has value in the setting. The school documents focus on relationship building to build a community.

> [SD] *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. We believe a strong relationship 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.*

Creating supportive relationships requires one to have an awareness of the historical basis of the relationship between school and home is (Collins et. al., 2023; Excell, 2016; Ebrahim, 2014). In the apartheid past of South Africa little value was placed on parents from vulnerable communities. In developing parent participation through relationship, the teachers and parents need to ensure they are working to end this view of parents and settings (Cox-Petersen, 2011:6). I believe that clear and open communication is vital to developing relationships within the setting. An important aspect of developing good relationship skills is to have clear, open communication, whilst being flexible and responsive to the parents (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022). During the AI workshop parents and teachers described the relationships they have with each other as,

> [AI]   *Recognise the worth of others,*
>
> *Complement each other,*
>
> *Showing your appreciation.*

Supporting parents to become involved in the ECCE setting requires the teachers to understand the parents' desires and aspirations (Biersteke et al., 2023; Cox-Petersen, 2011). Parents and teachers need to establish the parameters of expectations of the two groups. Ideally these expectations foster relationship building by both parties clearly communicating their expectations and needs.

> [SD] *Home visits for new children are part of our educational service. This helps to bridge the home and the school, thus fostering positive relationships between directresses and families.*

The parents need to know what is expected of them and how they can equally become a vital part of the setting. Potential challenges within parent-teacher relationships include cultural differences, lack of co-operation and parents appearing disinterested in what takes place at school (Uitto et.al., 2021; Cox-Petersen, 2011; Epstein, 1985) The data also reflects potential challenges, of not being appreciative of the contributions individuals make within the ECCE centre and the effect this may have on the parents and teachers as they navigate relationship building.

> [AI] *We don't often show our appreciation.*

[J 1] It made me realise how important it is to speak up.

[SD] *Appreciate that school involvement creates community support and understanding. Value the educator and school's role as partners in your child's development. We ask parents to contact the school should they notice a change in behaviour or have concerns or require guidance with discipline.*

The teachers should encourage and support the parents by working with them, responding to the needs of the parents and listening to parent concerns and ideas, thereby building a community of practice. Keengwe and Onchwari (2022) suggest that building strong relationships with parents includes having respect for the family without judgement, being committed to the needs of the families, being open to making changes to best support the families and children and having a real understanding of the contexts the families function in. Accordingly I suggest that this approach also supports building a community of practice with common goals which are clearly identified.

To achieve the goals, the ethos of the school and the parents' ethos towards education should be clearly identified. Establishing clear approaches to the goals requires a dialogical approach that values the individual. This participatory approach towards the setting puts democracy at the heart of the educational goals of the ECCE centre (Freire, 1998; Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Learning to listen to what is being communicated and to respond appropriately assists to create a sense of ownership of and responsibility for individual roles and responsibilities within the setting. The ECCE setting intends to be an active space that builds relationships and community.

[SD] *We welcome you as part of a vibrant, innovative and engaged family, where we will strive to develop a community within a school environment. **Our Vision**: To create a safe, vibrant school that is the pride of the local community who seek to offer their children the best future possible. It is inclusive, welcoming, productive, and peaceful.*

I propose that this is the opportunity to show appreciation for individual contributions to connections being fostered and created. Good relationships between the setting and the parents include the setting being constructive and intentional in their relationship building by making sure they are welcoming and inclusive for all parents (Smith et. al., 2022:280). Relationship is built when everyone works together, teaching each other skills that enhance the community (Bangura, 2005:24). In the school policy document on parent support the following extract gives hope for sustained and deep relationships.

[SD] *We believe a strong relationship 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. The success of the school is largely dependent on the quality of the relationships which exist within the school.

Once strong and meaningful relationships are established, connections amongst all those in the setting allow the space for involvement within the setting. Involvement in the setting supports relationship building and provides a sense of purpose for the community within and surrounding the ECCE centre.

5.2.2.2. *Support*

Considering the ECCE centre as a source of support was evident in the all the datasets. Parents value the practical and emotional support the setting provides each family in the community. There was a strong voice on how the teachers were approachable and caring of the needs of the parents, with a clear understanding of the stresses of the community around the school.

> [PI 1] *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. And even though there is problems at home they encourage me to come and talk to them, so that it won't affect the child also but they're really supportive, that I can say*

> [PI 2] *Ons wil ook vir hulle help waar ons kan en so aan hulle is klein maar hulle is meer verstaanbaar. (We want to help them where we can, they are small but understanding)*

The support offered by the setting is a key element of connection between the parents and the setting. Knowing how power is negotiated within the parent-teacher relationship is important in making parents feel supported and not disempowered (Uitto et.al., 2021; Boyle et.al., 2018; Freire, 2017). As the ECCE centre is instrumental in providing practical and emotional support to the parents, without judgement, the parents feel connected to and part of the setting.

> [TI 1] *I usually message them, or I would go visit them if they are nearby. OK. Uhm, and just speak about why they're not sending their child or why they, why they removed themselves. Yeah, that's all I can do. There is some that, that I feel [more] comfortable with than others. Probably because some is not that open. Yeah, and some is still getting to know me. OK. And the parents that aren't open, I think obviously maybe they don't trust easily or they traumatic or trauma has happened in their life. Yeah, so I don't think it's a personal thing.*

> [TI 3] *Mm… stuff like that we want them to come out and we know most of them don't work and maybe they don't have money, but we take, we tell them*

they can take stuff and we will tell them, OK, that's R20, and when it's All Pay or whatever money money they get in, then they can come pay like month end. That's how we do it here. So, then we do that with them but sometimes they do and sometimes they don't.

[TI 4] *I think that would initially feed into their style of parenthood. So, some parents, obviously you could see that they're very involved in the child, and you know wanting to know what's happening next at school. You will exactly know, you can basically personalise message them to say this is the parents that you know and then some, obviously based on the parent and then I would also say based on their home circumstances because obviously that feeds into a lot.*

I was aware that the parents expressed their appreciation of the teachers taking the time to listen to them and offer support in the home as well. This approach aligns with the policy documents of the setting that aim to support parents with their children at home. The intention is to create consistency for the children, whilst parents and teachers work together in the best interests of the child.

[SD] *In the best possible way, provide a home environment that best supports your child in building of self-esteem, social and cognitive ability and development of positive learning habits and attitudes.*

It is important for teachers to know how they position themselves with the parents by reflecting on the language they use and their personal views of parents in the setting (Uitto et.al., 2021; Ebrahim & Pascal, 2016). Teachers need to be aware of how they view parents, either as a support or a challenge within the setting. Being aware of their own approaches and practices helps teachers know how they then support the children and families in the ECCE centre.

[TI 3] *I think it would go wider because there is sometimes where we, where children would just walk in up and down here in our space. But 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. So, whatever they do here, now they're not gonna get anything like the school maybe can, maybe we can, we can work something out. So, whatever they do to help us, maybe we can give them a bread when they go home.*

[TI 1] *Yeah, and there is some parents that's, like we've done like a tick box. So, we ask parents what's important for them, is it food, is it education, and education is the last thing that they chose.*

I observed that in this ECCE centre the teachers are happy with the parents and families helping them and the general view is that the parents are considered helpful to the centre. The teachers are aware that, due to the social stressors within the community, parents may not always see the importance of the educational aspects of the setting, but they do value how they feel personally supported by the setting. Teachers who value the input of the parents can impact the quality of the ECCE centre positively for the children, building on participation and open dialogue, which aligns the values of the centre with those of the parents (Excell, 2016). Appreciating what the parents can offer the school values them as a resource within the school, which benefits the teachers as they feel supported by the families (Uitto et.al., 2021; Formosinho & Passos, 2019; Fenton et.al., 2017). The setting shows its appreciation by letting the parents know that their contribution is valued. This creates a strong community of practice where all are valued within the community. Throughout the data collection process there was a sense of the stakeholders wanting to work together for the good of the children and the community. The focus on community building and sharing and supporting each other is especially pertinent within the context of the setting in a vulnerable community (Bettencourt et.al., 2020; Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019; Boyle et.al., 2018). One parent expressed this simply in the AI workshop.

> [AI] *Gedeelde vreugde is 'n gedubbelde vreugde, gedeelde smart is 'n halwe smart.*
>
> *(Joy shared is joy doubled, shared sorrow is halved sorrow).*

Support for the setting and the parents is a collaborative process that builds the community. Ensuring that the voices of all stakeholders are heard and valued encourages a democratic approach to community building.

5.2.2.3. Community

At the core of feeling connected is the idea that everyone is part of the community. Strong links can be forged between being a supportive community and being a community of practice, as discussed in the theoretical framework. Communities of practice includes social participation, which is how we naturally learn (Hughes et al., 2007:3). One participant explained in their journal,

> [J2] *It helped me be part by the interactions with the teachers. I felt part of the school because we had to make dough that we could give our kids to play with.*

Feeling part of a community is vital to the development of the community within and around the ECCE centre. During the AI workshop the participants expressed agreement that working together built a love of the community and allowed them to be a good example for the children of what a community could look like in the future.

[PI 3] *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. You can keep an eye on their own child and know that like, you know the area here is very wild. But knowing that somebody that knows your child and your child knows it makes you also feel safe and knowing your child is safe.*

[PI 7] *Because uhm, how can I say now… it's a benefit for us parents and for the community and for the children, so a great benefit to the community also.* [to say what we think].

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

Laluvein (2010) expresses the need for parents and teachers to agree with how they will communicate with each other to improve decision-making as part of a community of practice. Parents are encouraged to be part of a supportive community within the ECCE centre and this has benefits for the community. These benefits extend from being concerned with their own children to taking care of all the children in the community. A supportive community within the ECCE centre has the potential of being beneficial to the wider community around the setting as parents interact with others, modelling participatory interactions. In the community of Lavender Hill many adults take on the role of caring for children in general. Collins et al. (2023:104) refer to the importance of recognising the role of 'day-mothers' as those supporting the parents with child-minding also become part of the community of the setting.

The teachers in the setting are equally aware of the importance of building a community within the ECCE centre. I observed this through them encouraging parents to get involved, understanding what is occurring in the centre and how the teachers engage with the children and teach them.

[TI 2] *In the classroom. If they have the experience. They need to have experience by knowing how to work with the activities and the children because you can't allow just any parent into our space. So, maybe we need to explain it, maybe they need to go for training or even just we as teachers can show them. Yeah, so that they can have an idea of the uhm, the activities. All I want is for parents to know what is happening in the classroom, they must have an idea.*

[TI 4] *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 kinda 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 love doing at school and stuff like that. So, the benefit would be that the child might receive much more out of the parent at home then what he gets, he obviously gets nourishment and care here but necessarily can't say that's what he gets at home. So, if the parent is involved and participate here with the child, at home the participation involvement itself would initially increase as well.

[TI 3] *If they could see, maybe there is a lot of them that came to me and tell me like look here this child, something has changed in this child's behaviour, like one boys mommy, she told me this child was very rude, but since he's going creche here, she can see he is changing. So maybe if I can, maybe show them a clip or something, record the children while they're here and just to show them like look here this children is really working and if would be an absolute amazing thing if you as the parent involve yourself with that.*

The school documents value all the families within the community and value their contributions towards community building.

[SD] *We strive to uphold a multicultural community. Parents are expected to be involved through the contribution of their own special skills and talents with the children.*

Developing meaningful connections within the community of parents in the setting has the benefit of creating a sense of caring and love for everyone involved. Encouraging a supportive community within the ECCE setting benefits all the stakeholders and has a ripple effect to the community around the setting. Creating a community within the ECCE centre occurs if there is an asset-based approach towards parent participation (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Laluvein, 2010). Knowing that parents in low SES also aspire for their children supports the concept of community cultural wealth described by Yosso (2005:76) as bringing the knowledge, skills, abilities and relationships within in the family into the ECCE centre for the benefit of the whole community.

The setting becomes the centre of the wider community through special events to draw people in. One teacher expressed the value of seeing the ECCE centre as the heart of the community.

[TI 3] *When it comes to community development, so between the teachers and the parents, also that community can see the space, but also the school as a lighthouse.*

[TI 2] *If they involve themselves, especially, yeah, like and this community for example, they… the community yeah, the struggle is so real here outside. So, evens like I said, Youth Day the involvement, it was 100%.*

Developing a strong sense of community occurs when we see the value and worth of everyone contributing to the life of the ECCE centre. The parents, children and teachers are valued as a community where everyone contributes towards improving the immediate community of the centre as well as the community around the ECCE centre. Padayachee et al. (2023) suggest creating opportunities for learning within the community should be relevant in the community to create social transformation. This occurs by using the concept of ubuntu to use the community skills and knowledge to develop wellbeing and harmony within the immediate community of the ECCE centre, rippling out to the community the centre is set in. Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) view ubuntu as bringing humanness into aspects of community life. The community around the ECCE centre is invited to contribute their time to the development of the setting for the benefit of the children. To establish a strong community within the ECCE centre, the parents and teachers work together supporting each other. Shared ideas, understandings and knowledge are valued and considered as connections strengthen. Encouraging community building requires a mutual agreement on how to collaborate and work together for the good of the setting, the families, the children, and the wider community.

5.2.2.4. *Collaboration*

Through significant interactions parents and teachers in the setting collaborate to create strong connections for the benefit of the community. Collaboration is the opportunity to create a supportive framework that provides the best educational and social outcomes for children (Knoche et. al., 2015). True collaboration relies on real connections and teamwork through interactions between the families and the teachers. During the AI participants spoke about collaboration in terms of being a team that is empowered to make change.

> [AI]   *Teamwork is the key to the future.*
>
> *We would like to interact and be a team.*

Teamwork occurs when power is negotiated by considering the roles of the stakeholders in the ECCE centre, making sure no one feels disempowered (Padayachee et.al., 2023; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Uitto et.al., 2021). The centre documents align their teaching pedagogy with parent participation.

> [SD] *Implementing the Montessori curriculum in the South African context with awareness of appropriate current educational and child development research following authentic Montessori standards. Montessori is a way of being, incorporating partnerships with parents and families.*

This setting values collaboration with parents in line with their ethos. This approach was evident in the interviews with the parents where the idea of being a team and collaborating for the benefit of the children was expressed. Collaboration helps the parents feel connected to and needed by the ECCE centre.

> [PI 3] *they will also have meetings with parents, if they wanna do something and ask for opinions or like advice or ask them what we think they can do to to sometimes make it safer or better, or what I can do to raise money or whatever for the kids.*

> [PI 6] *They actually ask us to come and volunteer. It's like cleaning the garden and sometimes taking the stones away and when they organise like for Youth Day they did something and they involved all the parents to just help them organise something for the kids.*

> [PI 7] *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. Because uhm, how can I say now… it's a benefit for us parents and for the community and for the children, so a great benefit to the community also.*

Teachers provide parents with a positive role model on how to be part of the setting. Parents are free to share their home lives and parenting approaches with the teachers. Collaboration between teachers and parents supports the alignment of parenting practices with the setting's approach to working with children (Smith et. al., 2022:279). Family-school engagement encourages parents to be open to learning more about how the school operates and what role they can have in it. Encouraging collaboration also aligns with the pedagogical approach of the ECCE centre. I believe the parents' lived experiences are also valued by the teachers and the parents are aware of the value they can add to the teachers and the ECCE centre. The teachers in the setting are eager to help the families have a deeper understanding of the pedagogical approach used within the classroom and assist in creating opportunities to align this with how the families support the children at home.

> [TI 1] We ask parents what's important to them, is it food, is it education, and education *is the last thing they choose. We want to help them create a better life for themselves.*

> [J 3] *It helps me being a part of a very important stage of my child's life.*

> [J 1] *I learn that by helping the school that you helping the kids to learn better.*

> [SD] *We encourage all parents to take a morning to observe in the classroom to gain an insight and understanding of our programme.*

Effective collaboration occurs when parents feel comfortable within the setting. To provide this comfort, settings need to be culturally responsive (Collins et. al., 2023:95). Parents are more likely to collaborate with the setting if they are made to feel they have a place within the setting. This is demonstrated by the teachers in the ECCE centre having an awareness of this within the environment and community they work in.

[TI 4] *It would be an absolute amazing thing if you as the parent involve yourself and see what happens in class during the day.*

Collaboration enables all stakeholders to know they are valued and have a voice within the setting. Good communication supports connections between home and school (Smith et. al., 2022). Genuine collaboration is non-judgemental and provides individual agency by giving space for new ideas and learning, based on trust.

[TI 3] *…groups of parents can obviously now take responsibility from the school. Parents collectively, or as individuals can take over responsibility, take ownership and contribute.*

Being open to new ways of operating and being willing to learn from each other occurs by creating opportunities for meaningful participation. The teachers in the centre need to be aware of their approach and work with the families to create collaboration by inviting the parents into the centre (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022). My suggestion for successful collaboration, includes the setting ensuring the communication they have with parents is open, meaningful, and supportive. Equally, parents need to know that they are required to communicate their needs and experiences with the school. Collaboration provides the opportunity for all to build knowledge and expertise as resources are combined for the benefit of the children, which in turn strengthens the ECCE centre (Knoche et.al., 2015:373). Being open to connecting and collaborating is an important aspect in developing a genuine partnership with parents in the ECCE centre who feel empowered and motivated to contribute to the community and become involved in the life of the centre where they feel valued for the contribution they provide.

5.2.3. Theme Two: Participation as Empowering. 'Part of the school through interactions'

Theme Two explores how the ECCE centre encourages parent participation through activities, showing parents they value their input and voice in the day to day running of the ECCE centre.
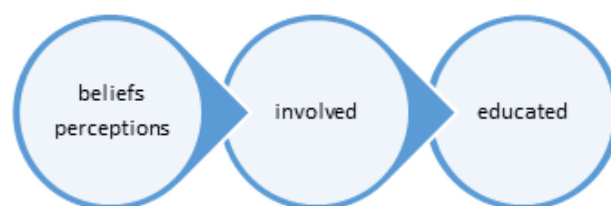
Figure 5-3 Empowered: Sub-themes

This theme considers how parents are encouraged to participate practically whilst providing an opportunity for them to have a voice within the ECCE centre that better supports the children and the community. Exploring how the teachers in the setting support the parents to participate meaningfully, valuing their contribution to the immediate ECCE community helps support the wider community around the ECCE centre. Throughout the data collection process stakeholders commented on the ECCE centre being successful due to the interactions that

take place on a regular basis. Acknowledging that all '*are part of the school through interactions*' and that for the setting to run well they ensure '*good communication practices that bring in diversity of thought and creative energy*'.

Valuing regular, meaningful interactions continues to grow a strong partnership between all the stakeholders in the setting. Padayachee et.al. (2023) identify ECCE centres as places that can reignite the African values and norms of ubuntu by creating spaces that support social cohesion and community responsibility. Spending time getting to know each other and developing relationships based on care and trust develops a community of practice within the setting where everyone knows their purpose, with common goals. Education White Paper 5 (South Africa, 2001:5) describes this as encouraging active participation for parents and caregivers. This can take place by focusing not only on the academic life of the setting, but also the social life of the families in the setting (Padayachee et.al., 2023). Encouraging participation also creates the opportunity to empower all participants in the ECCE centre as they are supported in becoming an integral part of the community by valuing their experiences and ideas. Empowering those in the ECCE has a benefit to developing social cohesion through a commitment to shared interests and responsibilities within the community as equity between all stakeholders is supported (Jevtic, 2023). A shared purpose and willingness to negotiate encourages dialogue that empowers individuals within the community and is aligned with Dewey's (1916) description of a 'conjoint communicated experience' (Laluvein, 2010:176).

Feeling part of the community of the ECCE centre empowers both the families and the teachers by making a space for them to share their individual experiences of life, creating personal agency through the exploration of the power relations within the community, ensuring that all feel included (Jevtic, 2023; Laluvein, 2010). I recommend that it is important to consider not only how families are empowered but also take the personal belief systems of the teachers in the setting into account and reflect on how they are empowered to take ownership of the setting.

Freire (1998) alludes to the importance of people feeling empowered in a community when there is shared dialogue about the beliefs we have. Wenger et.al. (2002) discusses the importance of having a shared identity to align our beliefs with each other. Exploring the beliefs of those who are in community with us, helps to create a shared value system where all stakeholders are valued as part of the community. Sharing beliefs and value systems also helps address issues of empowerment as all are considered equal in their contribution towards the ECCE setting.

5.2.3.1. *Beliefs*

Personal beliefs about one's potential role in the life of the setting originate from past experiences, including how one's own parents interacted with schools in the past.

Understanding the authoritarian apartheid structures that encouraged a 'hands off' approach between parents and schools may still be perpetuated is an important acknowledgement of

the beliefs we have of the relationships between ECCE centres and parents. Padayachee et.al. (2023) state that if we are to support democracy within the community, we need to ensure education takes place in a democratic way. When speaking with the teachers, I was at times aware of the unintentional creeping authoritarian approach that may view parents as being at a deficit when it comes to contributing to the life of the ECCE centre. Phrases used to describe parent participation by the teachers included '*parents must*, *compulsory to volunteer*, *we allow parents to …*' and '*entice parents with food and drink*'. In the interviews one teacher spoke directly to the need for parents to participate as they do not need to pay for their children to attend the setting.

> [TI 1] *So, most of the children have their bursaries, so it is compulsory for the parent if we do need volunteers, they need to attend.*

Exploring the beliefs teachers have about parent participation also need to be considered as it impacts how parents are made to feel they have a right to participate. As most interactions that occur between parents and the setting are initiated by the teachers, there is a possibility that parents are considered 'visitors' in the setting and participation is then controlled by the teachers (Jevtic, 2023:131). Awareness of parents feeling like outsiders needs to be reflected on and can be informed by past understandings and beliefs of parent participation by teachers. This may result in the setting paying lip service to parent participation. The intention for participation is created based on what teachers decide the parents can contribute. Van Laere (2018) alludes to this as a democratic deficit where parent participation is limited to what the teachers consider necessary or important. Teachers need to be aware of their own beliefs about parent participation as they express this to parents, either intentionally, or unintentionally. One parent expressed her awareness of feeling guilty about not participating in the setting.

> [PI 3] *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. It's actually an embarrassment seriously, it's actually an embarrassment to not help out.*

Her comment about feeling embarrassed also addresses the belief system she has about her lack of participation in the ECCE setting and her perception of how teachers may view her interest in the ECCE centre and in her child. Ideally the teachers in the setting should be aware of the pressures parents face and find a way to support the parent, instead of viewing the parent as being disinterested in the ECCE centre. The parent's stress at not being available also reflects her belief that she has little to offer the setting. The ECCE centre documents speak to parents being encouraged to be an integral part of the setting.

> [SD] *We accept all students whose families commit to partner with the school to contribute to the building of our school community. Prior to admission, family members are required to attend compulsory, preparatory workshops.*

Jacobs and Daniels (2020) discuss the education system perpetuating a view of parents from low socio-economic groups as having limited cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2007) with little interest in contributing to the life of the school. This narrative of a deficit approach towards families, especially single parent families, should be challenged by developing an 'asset-based' approach, looking at how families support their children despite the complexities of their lives (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020:162).

The ethos the setting projects may make parents feel the school knows what is best for the children and parents are only valued as volunteers in certain activities. Equally, due to parents' past experiences they may not believe they have anything of value to contribute to the setting and so stay away. The challenge to this belief is expressed by the parent who states.

> [PI 4] *I'm trying my best because why there's coming functions up now. What was the function we had here, that was our first thing, we were doing… and we tried our best and I was so excited Mandela Day, in what month was that now, here was something. Youth Day. Yeah, we were so excited because we were walking in the rain and looking for sponsors, you know who can help us. We want to do it for our kids. Yeah, and so but I'm busy now with holiday care so I need to get myself like three months before. How can I say… yeah, I've got ideas, but I want to get more like involved.*

Her desire to participate and share her ideas can be harnessed by the teachers if they believe that parents are eager to contribute to the setting, but are perhaps unsure of how to do this. Developing parent participation through communities of practice challenges the 'school centric' approach to learning and teaching as it sees that the parents are also part of the learning process (Hughes et.al., 2007:3). The same parent continued to express their belief and understanding of the benefits of being part of her child's life at school.

> [PI 4] *I want to put more [in] to get the best out of it, because why uhm, as the days go by there is no benefit sitting at home, yeah, it's nothing about the money but the more I can put in, the best for education [for my child].*

In the process of developing parent participation in the ECCE centre an exploration of beliefs of all stakeholders will support a clear understanding of expectations. In single-parent households, such as those in this study, parent support is considered a community effort as parents look for support from within the community, developing a sense of ubuntu by valuing the social networks within the community of the setting (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020:168). One parent spoke about an awareness of the children in the setting knowing which parents are active within the community and work, as opposed to those parents who sit on the street near the centre and do nothing to contribute.

> [PI 5] *Yes, and it it's better to have a change because why the environment we in live, like live is most of the time the children look up to their parents*

because when it's an idol for them, when you come to school, then other children ask do your mommy work, what is your mommy doing then they're gonna feel out when they say but my mommy sit on the corner because why in this environment there must be something, there must be a difference, you see to become something in their lives, to achieve.

In the journals parents also reflected on their belief that contributing to the life of the ECCE centre has value for their child at school and at home.

[J2] *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.*

Believing that parent participation is beneficial to children helps strengthen relationship building and a sense of community where stakeholders feel valued and empowered. Alongside this, the teachers can encourage parents to contribute their skills, abilities, knowledge and resources, which Jacobs and Daniels (2020) explain as aspirational capital, as an empowerment of the parents in the setting. In this setting the parents have the belief that they are contributing towards the setting for the benefit of their children.

[PI 6] *For me the benefits [of being involved] are, you can see your child is learning and to be part of your child's life also. They are in a safe environment.*

[J 1] *It has made me realise how important it is to speak up. I have faith in our children to become something better than us.*

Providing the opportunity for parent participation has the potential benefit of supporting the aspirations the parents have for their children to be successful academically and socially. Creating a space where everyone knows they have a voice because they are encouraged to speak up, sharing their experiences and ideas supports the development of a sense of trust within the centre. Trust is established when everyone feels safe and valued and are encouraged to have a sense of ownership of the setting. Jevtic (2023) makes a clear connection between open communication as a corner stone of maintaining a trust relationship with parents. There is a sense of both the teachers and parents learning together which contributes towards a combined ownership of the ECCE setting. The teachers reflected on how parents being part of the physical classroom with the children encourages more participation. Perceptions of parent participation appear to be based on parents gaining a real understanding of what their child is doing during the day and how the teachers manage the environment with links to how this can be supported at home.

[TI 1] *Yes, I think participation is more the parent is basically in the child's space. Maybe, I don't know, maybe in the child space as in maybe coming to*

clean the kitchen or uhm, clean the kitchen at school? Yeah, maybe, whatever volunteering work.

[TI 2] *Uhm… may be, I think, they should help us as Teachers, they can also participate with the schoolwork, for example. Sit with their kids after school. Because it feels like we are doing, is like we don't get that 100% because I can teach the letters "a", "b", "g" and then the next day the child doesn't know. So, maybe if parents help us with the work, the schoolwork and then it would be much better.*

[TI 3] *I think, it will mostly affect, not affect, it will mostly reflect on the child 'cause they know their parent is at home and whatever, 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. I think it would go wider because there is sometimes where we, where children would just walk in up and down here in our space. But if parents is participating and they're helping us*

Joint ownership within the setting helps build and strengthen the ECCE centre community. All stakeholders in the ECCE setting believe their contribution, no matter how small, is valued. There is recognition of the non-traditional social capital present within single-parent families and the school uses this to collaborate meaningfully with the families in the setting (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020:172). When parents have knowledge of what happens during the school day, they then have agency within the setting as the teachers encourage parents to be a part of the setting through regular meaningful interactions within the daily life of their child in the setting.

Understanding how the parents and teachers believe what each other's role in the setting is, includes reflecting on where these ideas come from and how they are perpetuated. Reflecting on one's own experience of being part of a school community is an important aspect, as past experiences inform future actions. Awareness of the micropolitics of how parents and teachers relate is an important part of developing parent-teacher relationships that support the children and the setting (Uitto et.al., 2021; Freire, 2017). Believing parent participation in the ECCE centre has value was mentioned by teachers when they spoke about how the children benefit from parent participation.

[TI 4] *It will reflect on the child if the parent is involved because they know their parent is at home…if they see the parents participating…I think it will become much more respectful in a way. I think the main benefit is that the child will benefit from it a lot because then the same sense of education that he receives at school would initially be the same thing that he would receive at home.*

This reflection also supports how change in beliefs about inclusive parent participation can occur. Formosinho and Formosinho (2012:11) describe this in their fourth axis as the

opportunity to create meaning through conversations to learn and value experiences. Jacobs and Daniels (2020) refer to the academic socialisation in parents from low socio-economic groups as being based on their own experiences of interaction with schools. Once there is acknowledgement by all stakeholders that the approach and beliefs about parent participation can change, consideration must be given to how this change can occur. Creating opportunities to encourage parent participation has the potential to empower all stakeholders in the setting knowing their contributions are valued and respected. Encouraging parent participation through active and meaningful involvement in the setting includes parents believing their contribution is valued, as well as the teachers supporting and encouraging meaningful participation through involvement in a variety of activities.

5.2.3.2. *Involvement*

As discussed in the literature review, it is well established that ECCE settings value parent involvement. Parent involvement improves a child's academic and social well-being (Collins et. al., 2023; Smith et. al., 2022; Uitto et al., 2021; Janssen et. al., 2012). Throughout the data collection parents mentioned their own understanding of the value their involvement has on the lives of their children in the centre.

> [PI 1] *parents involved in activities and the school playground, school grounds, so we initially had to uhm, 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.*

> [PI 5] *it's important because why sometimes you don't understand like at school then you can ask your parents to help you with your schoolwork because sometimes for me it's better to be honest, like when you come out of school, can you tell your parents what did you learn and then they know now you learn at school.*

> [PI 7] *I can see she is learning a lot here, for me it is something good because she also learns her little brother when she come from creche, and he can do everything that she is doing. So for me it is a great experience as a parent.*

Research into involvement makes clear links to the value of parents being involved in their child's education. Parents may not see themselves as equal partners in the setting and this impacts their approach to being part of the decision-making processes in the setting. They do not believe they are able to impact decision-making and policy (Collins, et. al. 2023:103). The teachers value the importance of parents being involved, bordering on making it less volunteering and more a compulsory task.

> [TI 1] *Uhm, for me it's basically the parents needs to be involved in the child's… uhm, school. When we have uhm, clean-ups, parent meetings they have to attend. Yeah, yeah, whatever, whatever we have at school, they have*

to attend and participate. So, functions within the school, with functions, yeah, yeah.

This passion for parents to be involved in the ECCE centre is closely linked to the perception that the parent who is involved is naturally interested in what their child is doing during the day.

[TI 2] *Being involved means they are interested also in the school. But I'm sure they won't mind to be 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. Yeah.*

[PI 2] *Ek sal kom as hulle sê daar is 'n meeting, dan sal ek kom en ek sal… because ek wil graag hoor hoe gaan dit, hoe hy vorder in die skool. Wat moet ek meer doen om te help.   (I will come if there is a meeting because I want to hear how it is going and how he is progressing at school. What else can I do to help.)*

[TI 3] *Parent involvement in the school is first of all the parent being interested as in terms of what the school is available to offer. A parent being curious … of what my child receives, so basically continuously engaging with teachers.*

The participants often referred to expectations around involvement in the setting. This varied from parents knowing that being involved in the setting is beneficial to their children, to the policies of the setting highlighting the need and expectation that parents are involved in the life of the centre. How parents get involved depends on their time, and ability.

[PI 1] *So, if I dedicate my time to the school then I'm not gonna be able to do it at home but there's a lot of benefits. Yeah, there was a lot of benefits when I started here before my child came to creche. But I would like to actually involve myself in the school and slack down on trying so hard to survive whole day, every day.*

[PI 4] *Uhm, so for… how can I say, volunteer and 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.*

The setting has established protocols to encourage parent involvement in the traditional arm's length approach. The school policy documents refer to parent involvement in the following way,

[SD] *With admission to the school you will be required to fill out a form indicating your areas of expertise and where you feel you can offer your skills in the running of the school.*

The document also places expectations on how parents need to be involved as well as what type of contact should occur between the parents and the centre. Setting parameters for expected parent involvement is useful, but must caution against being viewed as authoritarian, especially if parents are not able to meet the expectations.

> [SD] *Expectations on parents:*
>
> - *parent meetings/evenings*
>
> - *observations in the classroom*
>
> - *contribution of their own special skill.*
>
> - *Attending parent and educational events*
>
> *Parent/teacher meetings will be arranged twice a year. Both parents are expected to attend. We encourage you to make an appointment to discuss concerns, child's progress or Montessori practices at any time during the year. Parent contact is vital to your child's development. A written report for your child's progress will be issued at the end of each year.*

The school documents provide an extensive list of what parents can do to be part of the setting and know what their child is doing during the day. This indicates a desire to build a community as the suggestions are practical and include parents' participation in *birthday circles, mystery reader, flowers in the school, outings, baking, coffee mornings/evenings, parent education evenings and home visits.*

Limited involvement can be challenged at a pedagogical level as it should align with the ethos of the setting, based on Montessori (1974) approaches to parent involvement. Involving parents provides the opportunity for them to develop a sense of the space where their children spend their day. It also helps in the development of connections and community building. Parent involvement includes parents being involved in the life of the setting, as well as their attitude towards the setting (Janssen et. al., 2012). Encouraging parents to be involved requires the teachers to be aware of the perceptions parents may have about the setting.

> [TI 2] *Being involved means they are interested also in the school.*
>
> [AI] *Share each other's ideas and thoughts.*
>
> [SD] *Teachers prepare a parent education evening every term, where parents are invited to learn more about the areas of the Montessori classroom, the work your child is doing, Montessori philosophy, parenting issues and how to implement Montessori in the home. Attendance is expected and appreciated at these meetings.*

Encouraging involvement and participation is important as there is evidence that families and children from lower socio-economic groups tend to struggle with participation in traditional

schooling as there is no link between the culture of the school and the context the parents live in (Boyle et.al., 2018; Janssen et. al., 2012). Reflecting on how they get involved parents spoke about their practical involvement,

> [J 1] *I helped clean around the creches garden. I'd like to help out every week. I went to the safe circle meeting.*

> [PI 7] *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.*

> [J 2] *I helped clean around the creche garden. We had a meeting at the school where we also made playdough for our kids.*

> [J 3] *I always attend every meeting. The teacher tells you how your child adapts and progress in school.*

The teachers alluded to the importance of parents being present at centre functions and helping around the centre,

> [TI 2] *Uh… that the parents need to be involved in the school like maybe fundraisings, maybe like we had a Youth Day Ally, and the parents and the community and everybody was involved. OK. Yeah and evens Uhm, parent involvement also means that they are interested also in in the school.*

> [TI 4] *So, a parent, being curious in terms of what it is that my, my child receives, so basically continuously engaging with teachers in terms of what it is that you guys covered, what is the theme? I think there is various ways that the parent can participate in terms of for example, if schools has fundraisers first of all, so basically instead of the school coming up with the idea that the group of parents can obviously now take that responsibility from the school and basically do fundraising for the school and also obviously when it comes to certain things at school that they would like to do, maybe around, cleaning around the school building or even start a vegetable garden within the school that is being run by parents. When there is a meeting parent's must attend, like even come fetching their child when they are not working.*

The intention to support parent involvement includes being aware of how the teachers view the child at school, often based on how the parents engage with the setting. It is also important to consider how the child talks about the setting at home and how parents support what is happening in the setting at home (Janssen et al, 2012:384). Being involved in the setting helps parents understand what the child is doing at school and this learning can be supported at home.

[PI 1] *If I dedicate my time to the school then I'm gonna be able to do it at home. I find the time to learn…so that I can also do it with her when she comes home. What I don't do at school I make up for at home.*

[PI 6] *The teacher really want to speak to that parents who don't come. So, you never know what your child is really doing if you don't get involved.*

[AI] *To see the children learn makes us happy.*

The challenge is to move both parents and teachers to be more than involved as this requires interaction, often set by the school, with limited or no consultation with the parents. Creating opportunities for interactions allows for the development of understanding of each other's worlds (Bello, 2023; Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022; Freire, 2005). Parents expressed a desire to come into the building and spend time seeing what their children do and how the classroom runs.

[J 2] *It helps me as a parent to see that your child is in a clean place to play.*

[PI 3] *When he comes home, he always surprise me and when, before he came to the school I could say anything and he would like, but now when I switch on the TV and I put it on the Wild channel for animals, he will tell me exactly that's that an animal, that animal or the other day he said, mommy look at that bird have wings, neh. That bird flies, I said; yes, that bird flies.*

[PI 1] *Uhm, like if she's got something that she has to do at home, the teacher told her she must do it at home, learn her numbers and write and ABCs and the songs that she learns at school, I find the time to learn that and so that I can also do it with her when she comes home.*

[PI 2] *I think they… hulle is meer like happy as hulle uit die skool uitkom en hulle sal vir jou vertel like, mummy ek het die gedoen vandag of mummy ek het daai gedoen, teacher said I must learn this and teacher say I must write more this.*

(I think they…they are more happy when they come out of school and they tell you, today mummy I did this and the teacher said I must learn this and the teacher say I must write more this.)

[PI 6] *For me the benefits are, you can see your child is learning and to be part of your child's life also.*

[PI 7] *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.*

Teachers mentioned the 'unspoken' barrier of the school gate, which appears to create a boundary between the parents and the classroom. Parents tend to drop and collect their children at the school gate and seldom venture past it into the building. The awareness of potential barriers to parent participation needs to be addressed and managed with teachers understanding the contexts parents live in and what barriers there are to them being involved (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022; Modise, 2022). The ECCE centre and the families who use the centre should share the responsibility of supporting the children by working together to create a system of involvement that supports the children's, learning, growth and development, both in the setting and at home (Smith et al., 2022; Meier & Lemmer, 2015; Okeke, 2014; Oostdam & Hooge, 2012). Encouraging parents to contribute meaningfully supports a democratic approach to the setting in line with the school philosophy, based on Montessori (1974) principles. Encouraging parent participation can be used as the starting point for developing relationship building to support the families and the ECCE centre within the community. Sharing personal knowledge, experiences and understanding requires both the teachers and parents to educate each other about these experiences. Bello (2023:226) describes this dialogue as providing the opportunity to regain one's humanity because there is an awareness of the community and what needs to be done to make changes and improvements. This also builds understanding and supports community building through participation. For parent participation to occur, it is also important to consider how parents and teachers have been consciously or unconsciously educated to be hands off or participatory (Strømme & Helland, 2020; Freire, 1998). Providing opportunities for learning that supports the participation of families in the life of the setting breaks down potential barriers that have existed within the community about their right to have a voice and share their knowledge and experiences.

5.2.3.3. *Education*

Learning about how families and the setting functions should be considered a symbiotic relationship where all the stakeholders learn and grow together. Learning together creates a parent-teacher relationships that values mutual responsibility for the child resulting in a positive outcome (Smith et.al., 2022; Janssen et.al., 2012). Learning together is at the heart of being in a community of practice, allowing people to slowly become an integral part of the community. Those in the community learn about each other and acquire the cultural practices required to negotiate and interact, creating joint meaning-making, linking knowledge and experiences through similar values (Collins et.al., 2023; Laluvein, 2010). Providing spaces and opportunities to learn from each other offers the opportunity for equity in the relationship through dialogue and interactions between the setting and the families (Jevtic, 2023; Laluvein, 2010). Both parents and teachers are viewed as experts as they make the best of what is available for the children academically, socially and emotionally. It is also important to learn about the unwritten rules that exist within the setting that may need to be reviewed as they inhibit real relationship as the teachers may consider themselves experts and do not value the

parents voice (Jevtic, 2023; Uitto et.al., 2021; Torres, 2014). The school documents are clear about the expectations that are set to educate and support parents.

> [SD] *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.*

The setting provides the time and space for parents to learn about what happens during the school day and how the teachers interact and engage with the children. The teachers should be aware of how they invite parents to participate in these workshops, as parents may feel they are 'guests' in the setting (Krijnen et.al., 2022; Cox-Petersen, 2011).

It is important to acknowledge that parents and teachers may have different approaches towards education and if there is to be full participation there needs to be the opportunity to jointly construct experiences to allow for changes to occur within the community of the setting (Jevtic, 2023; Van Laere et.al., 2018; Laluvein, 2010). An awareness of differing styles and understanding of parenting and education needs to be discussed and shared for meaningful partnerships to occur (Janssen et.al., 2012:385). In this setting the intention behind asking parents to attend workshops is to align parenting styles with the ethos of the centre, thereby creating continuity for the children. The school policy and documents also ask the teachers to '*provide positive role models for parents on how to relate to their children'.* Aligning with the pedagogy of the ECCE setting requires parent participation to support the children.

> [SD] *Maria Montessori taught that as facilitators of children's development, we constantly evaluate the effectiveness of our programmes and the needs of the child in today's society. She encouraged us to be scientists and to observe what it is that works best for each individual. Montessori is a way of being, incorporating partnerships with parents and families.*

The role of the teacher is to be a role model for the parents to support them to meet the needs of the children based on the context they are in. This is one way that educating parents is encouraged (Van Laere et.al., 2018; Wilder, 2014; Oostdam & Hooge, 2012). The teachers role model positive approaches to working and interacting with the children. This is in line with the pedagogical approach of the setting, where children are considered capable and competent to be responsible for themselves. Educating parents to understand this approach helps develop a sense of community that is working together.

> [SD] *The educator has an unobtrusive role in the classroom – teaching is collaborative. Creating a unique environment, suitable to the needs of the child for individual and spontaneous discovery and exploration while fostering the skills needed for later learning.*

Parents can understand what their children are doing during the day and the approach the teachers use to support the children. They are then able to continue this at home, thus creating a natural link between home and the setting.

> [PI 2] *Om te verstaan, as ons nie verstaan nie dan sal hulle vir ons explain, ok jou kind moet die doen en jou kind moet weet hoe om daai te doen.*
>
> *(to understand, if we don't understand they will explain, ok your child must do this and your child needs to know how to do that.)*
>
> [PI 7] *The benefit of this is that… how can I now say…. Dit lyk soos ons parents is uhm, almost like we grow with our children.*
>
> [PI 1] *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. She does, yeah.*
>
> [TI 2] *If they have the experience. They need to have experience by knowing how to work with the activities and the children. All I want is for parents to know what is happening in the classroom*.

Anecdotally some parents compared their own education to their children's and believe at a preschool level their children are receiving a better education than they had. How parents experienced education will have an impact on how they feel they can approach teachers in the setting (Munje & Mncube, 2018:87). The parents value knowing what takes place in the setting and enjoy their children receiving a 'better' education than they received.

> [PI 5] *To come, like maybe to come and to teach them (the parents). For the teachers to teach the parents. Yes, some because why sometimes also like in our years we didn't have it properly, we didn't function that moment because why that time it's like different like now. The education is better now as that time.*
>
> [PI 1] *Yes, she came home one day, and she was excited, so she told me my teacher showed us how to turn a solid into a liquid and a liquid into a gas and I said yoh but we did in Grade 9.*
>
> [PI 6] *So, it makes me feel better knowing that get the education, I'm going back, I don't like to go back where I come from, he gets what I didn't get. OK, so it makes me feel like, almost like I'm feeling special because he's learning.*

Taking the time to learn from each other helps the teachers and parents support the children in the setting. Parents want to be involved in their children's education and teachers should let parents know how they can support their children (Krijnen et.al., 2022; Fenton et.al., 2017;

Okeke, 2014; Keyes, 2002). In her journaling one parent mentioned she had learnt about what her child does at school and realised this was different from what takes place at home.

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

> [TI 3] *So maybe if I can, maybe show them a clip or something, record the children while they're here and just to show them like look here this children is really working and if would be an absolute amazing thing if you as the parent involve yourself with that. Parents will do introspection based on how the teacher is versus how I'm with my child at home.*

These experiences are best described by Krijnen et.al. (2022) as developing a community of learning where sharing experiences is beneficial to the ECCE centre. Through role modelling this approach, the teachers also view the parents as capable and competent (Hancock & Cheatham, 2021:69). It is important that with this approach the parents are not considered incapable of parenting but rather it is used as an opportunity to learn from each other. The parents and teachers create opportunities to have discussions to better understand and support each other. Providing opportunities for ongoing dialogue supports the Freirean idea of a dialogic approach (Freire, 1998). This allows all stakeholders to contribute their skills and ideas.

> [SD] *We will have regular coffee mornings/evenings with one of the teaching staff/parent representatives to allow for sharing of Montessori/parenting ideas, open communication and affirming support in the efforts we all make to optimise our children's care.*

All skills and experiences are viewed as important within the community of the ECCE centre and everyone has a role to play in contributing for the benefit of the children. Learning together also builds trust through relationship building. Parents are encouraged to offer their skills and knowledge to improve aspects of the setting. The teachers appreciate the parents being able to support them in the classroom if needed.

> [TI 2] *To be able to stand in for a teacher; I think they'll probably need some training and how to be with the children and what to do, yeah.*

> [TI 3] *So, there's certain parents that, you know that is here and they are invested in the child…it will allow them to take more ownership of the space as well. So, I understand the type of quality education that my child get and sometimes that will ignite to them so that they can make their house conducive for the child as well.*

Due to the pedagogical nature of the setting, the teachers expressed the importance of educating the parents about how the classroom runs, especially if parents are going to

contribute significantly to the life of the ECCE centre (Montessori, 1974). There was some concern raised that parents may not always fully understand or appreciate the pedagogical approach of the setting and that this is an important aspect for the children to feel there is a consistent approach towards the children.

[TI 2] *They need to have experience by knowing how to work with the activities and the children because you can't allow just any parent into out space. So, our parents also need to, maybe they need the, the, the… I think not the skills but we need to actually also show them actually and so they can know what is happening, what Montessori is all about.*

[TI 3] *I don't think a lot of parents actually understand what is happening in the class…I think they should be able to have access to come and explore the classroom. [the language used in the classroom is not familiar to them]*

[TI 4] *I don't think a lot of parents actually understand what is happening in the class, especially from a Montessori point of view. So, for some parents' 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.*

The pedagogical approach used in Montessori environments (Montessori, 1974) means teachers are protective of the space for the children and not eager to invite adults in. This may have implications for parent participation, and it is important that the teachers work with the parents to explain the pedagogical approach and how the children are respected and valued in the ECCE centre. Educating the parents on how to conduct themselves in the classroom encourages a better understanding of the needs of the children and the teachers and has the potential to influence of how parents approach their children in the home. Teachers also need to be aware of the language they use when explaining Montessori concepts to parents to educate and engage parents. The intention of educating parents on the Montessori approach is beneficial as what the parents learn in the setting can be extended into the home (Laluvein, 2010; Montessori, 1974). Reflecting on assumed knowledge and understanding and adjusting can help move teachers towards seeing the parents as supportive of the setting, instead of a challenge to the work they are doing with the children. Equally the teachers also need to be flexible and open to learning from the parents to build relationships that are socially cohesive and build the community in the centre (Uitto et.al., 2021; Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019; Cox-Petersen, 2011; Dewey, 2001). Valuing the contributions parents can make to the setting has the benefit of supporting a community of practice with dialogue and mutual learning.

In the interviews with the teachers, they spoke about valuing parent input into the centre and acknowledged that parents may not have a deep understanding of what takes place, but that

they are open to learning. The teachers also see the value of parents understanding what takes place in the classroom. In the interviews one of the teachers provided examples of teaching parents about what and how the children are learning in the classroom to have a good understanding. The teachers are aware of the importance of educating parents and see this as beneficial to the setting. Meaningful contributions by parents have a ripple effect of them participating within the setting which has the potential to influence the wider community as parent participation provides the parents with a sense of purpose, often much needed in areas like Lavender Hill.

> [TI 3] *that language is not familiar if they're not inside the classroom to really experience and understand what is the approach there. They get it on paper, but they're not getting that, like the didactic ways of yoh… this is actually how you do it. So, I think if I could, that would be a great way for them to participate and to get involved in the same time, in the class.*

> [TI 2] *We need to actually also show them actually and so they can know what is happening, what Montessori is all about. They need to have experience by knowing how to work with the activities and the children*.

> [TI 4] *If I could really just, maybe I could show them what, what the child learn from February until now. So, I understand the type of quality education that my child get and sometimes that will ignite to them so that they can make their house conducive for the child as well.*

Equally, the teachers show they are open to learning from the parents by positioning themselves as collaborators with the parents. However, teachers also need to be aware of the role they have in being open to learning from the parents. If the teachers educate themselves on parenting styles, they are then better able to know where the parents can benefit from support and learning (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022).

> [TI 4] *But I think they were unable to do that, and you encourage parents obviously that what they learn here, you. should do it at home but if they don't have a clear understanding what is being doing here, that is basically almost impossible to be able to do it at home.*

> [TI 2] *There is a lot of them that came to me and tell me like look here this child, something has changed in this child's behaviour.*

The teachers view of parent participation includes considering parents not knowing what is taking place in the setting and querying approaches as they notice positive changes in their children at home. The teachers are encouraged not to have a deficit view of the parents by considering them as being at a disadvantage because they lack knowledge, skills and abilities attributed to poor social capital, but rather embrace the experiences the parents have to offer

as part of the community by being open to learn from the parents as well (Munje & Mncube, 2018; Yosso, 2005).

Providing parent training that educates the parents on the day to day running of the setting assists parents to have a real sense of what their children are doing during the day. Throughout the Parent Handbook (Lavender Hill ECCE, 2022) there is mention of parents being encouraged to attend events that support their understanding of the pedagogical approach of the setting.

> [SD] *Teachers prepare a parent education evening every term, where parents are invited to learn more about the areas of the Montessori classroom, the work your child is doing, Montessori philosophy, parenting issues and how to implement Montessori in the home. Attendance is expected and appreciated at these meetings.*

As discussed earlier, in a Montessori setting the philosophy and approach to teaching and learning are likely to be very different from what the parents may understand of an ECCE centre and it is important to offer new approaches to parenting, whilst at the same time being open to learn about the reality of the circumstances the parents are in. It is equally important that the teachers do not view the parents as being disinterested in learning about new approaches to education (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021:3). During the AI workshop the parents and teachers collectively discussed the value of learning from each other to understand and support each other and the children. [AI] *more parent programmes, learn more about Montessori, want the support from the teachers, help our children make the right choices.*

Knowing that parents want to learn more about how the ECCE centre operates helps with the creation of an understanding of both the academic and philosophical approaches of the school. The intention is to make clear links between home and school, to develop a sense of consistency of care and approach towards the children. Parents experiences of education and teachers will have an influence on how they view themselves in the ECCE centre (Munje & Mncube, 2018:87). Providing parent events that allow for discussion that shares a variety of approaches is crucial as a tool to invite parents in from the start. The policies of the setting reflect the importance of parents attending meetings, as well as observing within the setting on a regular basis. The ECCE centre can be valued as responding to the needs of the families by taking personal situations into account (O'Keefe, et.al., 2022). Building sustained support between the setting and home helps parents and teachers know where the needs of each are and how these can be met.

Due to the community the ECCE centre is based in, there is a strong initiative within the setting, through the NGO that supports it, to provide parent programmes that help parents improve their work opportunities and living conditions. This is especially relevant within a community that is vulnerable due to lack of resources as the parents perceive education as the opportunity to invest in their child's future (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020:170).

[PI 5] *The benefit for me, like I'm in grade 11 out of school, for me it's it's gonna be a benefit to achieve for me also my goal to reach out for my child. Basically, to help me, like spesiaal [especially] for my education. Upskill me.*

[PI 4] *I'm talking about experience, I used to, I came a long road on with them doing workshops. I was dealing with Mary, I learnt really a lot with them so, yeah. Yeah, working with (name withheld) them, all of them so yeah.*

[PI 3] *I don't know, but they know if they do things on a day up and they ask me, I make a plan to be there because the money that I get, like last time we had a meeting, … it helped me but that's all I wanted to say because I told myself, if they're gonna, even if they're not gonna ask me I'm gonna tell them that they helped me there.*

[J 1] *It's a good experience to learn. It makes me feel good seeing how well my child is doing in school.*

The parents may perceive themselves as operating at a deficit as they do not feel skilled or knowledgeable to support themselves and their children (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Munje & Mncube, 2018). Supportive parent education programmes are valued by the parents as it provides them with the opportunity to improve their lives and the lives of their children. Padayachee et.al. (2023) discuss the benefit of developing educational programmes that offer the opportunity to create social transformation through learning that is socially and culturally relevant. Parent programmes are run within the setting offering parents both emotional and practical support, whilst acknowledging their own social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018; Yosso, 2005). The programmes have contributed to building trust within the setting and wider community as parents are not viewed as being at a deficit, but rather their potential to make change is encouraged and supported. However, the setting is aware that not all parents take up the opportunities provided to them through the parent programmes offered. Epstein (2019) encourages settings to provide opportunities for learning at home with the intention that connecting the home and school environment provides opportunities for support. However, this can be construed as a top-down approach as the focus may be what benefits the setting and not what is the best way to build relationships. As discussed in Theme One, the parents expressed how they feel supported by the setting because the teachers aim to provide a non-judgemental space that acknowledges individual parent challenges and makes sure they are always open to parents when they ask for help or support. The role modelling by the teacher by offering a supportive relationship to the parents fosters a desire to participate and build a community of practice (Fenton et.al., 2017; Excell, 2016; Freire, 1998).

Theme Three: Reflecting on Participation. 'School depends on parent involvement'

The third theme explores parent participation through the lens of reflection to ensure all participants consider how their participation in the ECCE centre is maintained.
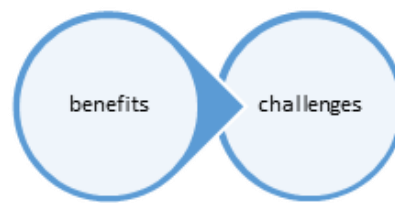
Figure 5-4 Reflecting: Sub-themes

Reflection is the opportunity to critically consider the situations people are in and then knowing how these situations can be changed and improved upon with an awareness of the historical impacts on society (Freire, 2005:110). Reflecting on the benefits and challenges of parent participation also provides the opportunity to explore the impact of personal experiences of parent participation. Whilst doing this there is an acute awareness of the personal and community challenges that may prevent active participation in the ECCE setting. As discussed in chapter four, the setting is based in an area of high crime, violence and unemployment. There is a need to reflect on how the parents in the setting experienced their own parents being part of their education (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Boyle et al., 2019; Atmore, 2013). Consideration needs to be given to what is taken for granted and how this influences decisionmaking (Dewey, 1916:23). Reflecting on past experiences also determines how a strategy can be developed that supports change within the community. An essential aspect of reflection includes an awareness of where the power sits within the ECCE centre to ensure a democratic approach to build a community within the context of Lavender Hill.

Being aware of lived experiences of parent participation included providing the opportunity for the parents interviewed to reflect on the role their own parents had in participating in school activities. In the interviews the parents shared experiences of how their own parents were involved in their school life.

> [PI 1] *My own parents were not involved.*
>
> [PI 3] *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. I don't like talking about it because it makes me feel… and I don't like feeling that way because at this moment I tried to give my kids the best that I can and not what I couldn't have.*
>
> [PI 4] *Uhm, according to me, actually when I was naughty in school they just popped up, but as far as I know I don't and like meetings and stuff.*

> [PI 5] *Not most of it, like every time because for me was like, it was hard because they was focused on them, like the things they used to do in in their lives.*

> [PI 6] *Not really because my mother were drinking and my father used to hit her, drugs, so …. Not really because my mother were drinking and my father used to hit her, drugs, so …*

The parents interviewed spoke about the apparent lack of interest their own parents had towards their own school life, providing reasons for why they could or could not get involved. This limited, or lack of involvement may be attributed to the idea that schools know best and that parents in low socio-economic groups are not interested and do not have the skills to participate (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Baxter & Kilderry, 2021). Only one parent spoke about her parents being part of her school life when needed.

> [Parent 2] *Yeah, baie. Hulle het meetings bygewoon en support as daar gesupport moet raak. Like as daar miskien nou 'n sop kitchen moet gerun raak, hulle sal altyd bygestaan het en sal dit gesupport het.*

> *(Yes, a lot. They attended meetings and supported if they needed to. Like if there was maybe a soup kitchen to run, they would always stand by and support)*

These reflections are valuable as it may influence how the parents interact and participate in the ECCE centre and formal schooling with their children. Freire (1998) considers the influence past experiences tend to have an impact on current experiences. Parents may avoid participating in the ECCE centre as the role model they had did not participate themselves and they may believe they add no value to the setting (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2023; Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Equally, teachers experience of parent participation may either encourage or limit parent participation.

> [TI 4] *So, parent participation for me would be certain things that parents collectively or as individual can take over the responsibility in terms of taking ownership of the outside area, beautifying the main, outside toys and stuff like that so.*

An awareness of these experiences provides the teachers in the setting the opportunity to make changes by developing relationships with each family. Doing this helps create the potential for new experiences for the parents by encouraging participation, with an awareness of the daily reality the parents in the setting live in (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Baxter & Kilderry, 2021). The need for parent participation is mentioned throughout the school documents as a vital aspect for the success of the ECCE centre within the community.

> [SD] *Supporting a diverse community in which our children encounter and learn to respect ethnic, cultural, economic and other differences to identify common ground. The school depends on parent involvement.*

Reflecting on the roles parents and teachers experience within the setting helps support meaningful community building and social cohesion. This occurs through dialogue with all stakeholders to make changes as required and ensure meaningful participation (Freire, 1998; Wenger et. al., 2002). Reflecting on individual contributions towards parent participation also assists to maintain an awareness of the benefits and challenges of this participation. Knowing the needs of all in the setting aids the develop supportive communities of practice through active and meaningful participation. Meaningful reflection supports the democratic development of dialogue and relationship building as teachers self-monitor interactions to build collaboration (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Reflecting on the interactions between the setting and the parents aligns with the principles of building a community of practice (Wenger, 2002: 51) as it helps create a rhythm for the community by building relationships and connections. The need for some form of ongoing reflection ensures that the future is not pre-determined as these limits the opportunity for change. Reflecting moves us a way from a fatalistic view of our world and experiences where we repeat what has always been done (Freire, 1998:91). The benefit and challenges associated with reflection need to be considered as the setting moves towards a democratic community that builds on its strengths and challenges.

5.2.4.1. *Benefits*

Creating opportunities for parents to participate within the life of the ECCE centre has benefits for all stakeholders. The main beneficiaries of parent participation in the centre will be the children. This benefit also extends to the wider community the parents are part of. Parent participation and ongoing dialogue enhances common interests and has the potential to transform through connection making between individuals (Wenger et.al., 2002). The benefits of parent participation are acknowledged globally as children are then supported academically, socially and emotionally in their development (Strømme & Helland, 2020; Munje & Mncube, 2018; Van Laere et.al., 2018; Meier & Lemmer, 2015). The school documents talk about the importance of parent participation in supporting the child and in one journal entry a parent reflected on this.

> [J 3] *I've learned a other side of my child's life because children are different at home then they are at school.*[sic]

Reflecting on the benefits of parent participation helps the setting ensure they continue to encourage meaningful participation. Harrison and Madingoaneng (2022:43) acknowledge that parental participation is a new phenomenon in Africa, which means teachers must learn to value parent input as well as parents knowing there is a benefit to them participating in the setting. The benefits for parents and teachers when parent participation is encouraged include

open and honest communication where information sharing and collaboration supports the ECCE centre (Modise, 2022:297). Being part of a community that encourages and promotes parent participation provides a space that supports and values all stakeholders within the community. This then becomes a natural aspect of the parent/teacher relationship where all are heard (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022).

The parents who participated in the semi-structured interviews spoke about how they spend most of their days trying to survive and provide for their children because of unemployment. Even with the social and environmental challenges for parents in the setting, they are acutely aware of the need for them to be part of their child's life in the ECCE centre to give them the best possible start.

> [PI 4] I want to put more I to get the best out of it, because why uhm, as the *days go by there is no benefit sitting at home, yeah, it's nothing about the money but the more I can put in, the best for education….We're trying our best*.

> [PI 6] *I actually want to be better [than my parents], be more involved in my children's lives.*

> [PI 5] *For me it's, to help your kids and to uhm, to understand also to be there for them. Because caring for me, it's like if you're not caring for your child and there's no responsibility for a parent, like for me, like in my life for me was it, my parents must be there because when there is no focus then the child's focus is gone. Like for, for, for me, it's like there must be a parent in the children's life to guide them also.*

Bettencourt et.al. (2020:3) allude to ecological systems theory to support the links between family and the setting, whilst not making assumptions about parent participation, or the lack thereof. Acknowledgement of the importance of parents believing and knowing they are an integral part of the setting supports connections without condemnation or approval (Dewey, 1916:16).

During the various data collection processes, the parents and teachers expressed their belief in the positive difference having parents participate in the ECCE centre has. When parents are encouraged to participate in the setting, a sense of pride develops within them that perpetuates the desire for them to continue participating in the setting. Although there are social struggles, the parents value being part of the life of their child in the centre and appreciate being part of conversations where everyone is learning together. Mokibelo (2022:48) considers the value of learning together being a benefit as parents have a better understanding of how their children are managing in the setting and what they can do to better to support their children. When parents also know the routine of the setting and how the classroom operates, it creates a natural bridge between the setting and the home (Boyle et.al.,

2018). The benefit of this level of participation includes parents learning how to support their children academically, in addition providing the opportunity for parents to improve their own experiences of learning (Okagbue et al., 2022; Li et.al., 2020; Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019). In turn this strengthens the parent teacher relationship and partnership.

> [PI 5] *The benefit for me, like I'm in grade 11 out of school, for me it's it's gonna be a benefit to achieve for me also my goal to reach out for my child. To be a benefit actually for the environment 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. I am giving her a better opportunity to go achieve her goal also.*

> [PI 6] *For me the benefits are, you can see your child is learning and to be part of your child's life also.*

Parents appreciate the opportunity to develop both their parenting and personal academic skills. Having a positive approach to participation and encouraging the parents to have a voice and agency in the setting is beneficial as parents and teachers support each other as changes occur. This level of support creates a cooperative environment with the relationship between the setting and home (Krijnen et.al., 2022; Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019). Mutual support is required for the change to be effective and sustainable. When asked if teaching the parents about the ethos of the school would benefit them, the teachers had a positive reaction.

> [TI 2] *It would be so much,…I'm sure they won't mind to be involved, and I am sure they don't mind me as a teacher maybe showing them and giving the idea of how the materials are used.*

> [TI 1] *We teachers will benefit actually a lot if parents know what is happening in the classroom.*

This positive approach to support amongst the adults has an impact on the children and how they feel about themselves. The adults around the child create and maintain positive relationships with a shared responsibility and decision-making for the children (Krijnen et.al., 2022; Hancock & Cheatham, 2021). The children will experience their teachers and parents working together as a community. Giese et.al. (2022) talk about the importance of children receiving the support and care they need if they are to be successful in school. The benefit of this level of support and care takes place when there is the opportunity for collaboration and communication between the setting and the parents. Children who experience their parents as part of their school day are better supported because the links between home and school are valued and encouraged. Parents, teachers and children engage in conversations about what happens during the day and there is a sense of valuing the contributions everyone makes towards the success of the ECCE centre (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Boyle et.al., 2018; Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). If this occurs consistently it is beneficial because it provides better opportunities for participation with the parents and children in the community.

[TI 3] *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.*

[AI] *They [children] will be loved, they will be confident, they will be happy, they will be appreciated, they will be fun.*

For the teachers in the setting the benefits of having significant parent participation helps them feel part of the community around the school. Equally, they will not feel like they are solely responsible for the care and support the children receive. Opportunities for quality interactions helps reduce anxiety for the adults and it becomes the natural way of functioning within the setting (Formosinho & Passos, 2019). Creating continuity between home and the setting involves working together to help the children achieve success. For this to occur, the teachers need to understand the diverse family settings, as well as the challenges that may exist for parents (Modise, 2022). Understanding happens when dialogue occurs and everyone feels valued and heard as they forge a way forward to improve the lives of the children in the setting and the wider community.

[PI 1] *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.*

[PI 2] *Because you keep them out of trouble, hou hulle besig en leer maar en… soos nou met die wat hieraangaan, die kinders is nie meer buite nie, so hulle is safe, hulle is by die skool.*

(Because you keep them out of trouble, keep them busy and learn …and with everything that goes on here, the children are not outside, so they are safe in the school)

The benefits of parent participation include the acceptance that the whole community, both within and without the setting, take joint responsibility for the children. Through encouraging parent participation, knowledge making occurs and there is a sense of people working together with a common approach (Hughes et.al., 2007). Formosinho and Formosinho (2012) best describe this type of participation as creating experiential opportunities to help develop relationships with a sense of belonging. The members of the community are valued as they contribute to supporting each other and create a sense of belonging (Gwele & Ebrahim, 2018; Wenger et.al., 2002). In Lavender Hill, knowing that all the adults are sharing responsibility for the children has the potential to strengthen the community as people support each other in times of need. Fuller (2007) foregrounds the realities of the community to create opportunities for transformation, stability and harmony. Partnering with parents creates learning opportunities for both the children and parents, as well as providing parents the chance to provide practical support to the setting (Boyle et.al., 2018; Atmore, 2013).

> [TI 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.*

> [AI] *to have a voice and be confident and have success.*

In this ECCE centre the familys' personal needs and their ability to support the setting fluctuates depending in personal circumstances. The teachers need to ensure that parents do not feel judged when they are not able to be part of the setting at times (Krijnen et. al., 2022). As some family dynamics may impact parent participation, the ECCE centre could consider approaching extended family that also cares for the child (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Providing opportunities for meaningful relationship building that allows for an inclusive and nonjudgemental approach which is reflected on by the teachers to ensure parents and families within the setting are supported even when they face potential challenges.

5.2.4.2. Challenges

The reality of being based in Lavender Hill and the challenges that exist within the community the ECCE centre is set in means the teachers must understand the individual needs of the children and families they work with. Overall, the teachers are supported by the parents who are available when they are needed. This availability varies depending on issues and challenges the families are managing. Parents are interested in being involved but poverty, single-parenting and poor access to economic resources may limit involvement (Epstein, 2019; Okeke, 2014). The teachers in the setting reflect on how they can continue to support the families in their time of need, aiming to stop themselves stereotyping parents and having preconceived ideas (Cox-Petersen, 2011). In the interviews the teachers reflected on the challenges they face encouraging parents to participate regularly, and meaningfully.

> [TI 1] *Weather, [when it is raining] they don't want to come out. I think it is just the mindset of the community. We had a safe circle last week and then like we invited about ten parents and only three pitched. It was disappointing…and we had to cancel the meeting.*

> [TI 2] *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. My challenge is if I can show one or two parents the classroom. Maybe I can teach the parents and their kids as well.*

> [TI 3] *I think the only reason why they don't come in because it's like a wall, the gate is the barrier…there is no access. Punctuality, unemployment, and there is no one to look after the child while [the parent] needs to be here or participate in the school.*

> [TI 4] *Most of the parents is not involved in anything. We have to beg them like to come…I have to go tell them you have to be here. These kids know their parents is absent. One of the challenges is they're not working at all and they spend the day looking for food.*

The data reflects a level of frustration the teachers have as they attempt to build a community to support the children and families. All the parents who participated in the research are unemployed. The implication of this is that at times they may be more focused on practically meeting familial needs, doing things like looking for food. Taking Maslow's hierarchy of needs (2013) into account, it is important the teachers understand the limitations of parent participation at times. In low socio-economic communities' families focus on survival, spending time finding food and ensuring adequate shelter. The challenge is to create a support system for the teachers as they attempt to build a collaborative community of practice. The teachers can create their own support network where they share their fears and challenges whilst evaluating their practice to make changes that support the creation of a community of practice that links practice and policy in the ECCE centre (Freire, 1998). An analysis of the school documents provided no clear strategy for how this support can be implemented. Epstein (2019) addressed written policies not always offering 'how' support can be implemented, especially when teachers want parents to participate but with little knowledge of how to implement intentional community building. Equally, teachers must be sensitive to the subtle messages parents give when they are needing support (Formosinho & Passos, 2019).

The challenges parents face in participating in the ECCE setting appear to be directly related to their personal circumstances. Lavender Hill is plagued with high levels of unemployment and the associated challenges that come with this; violence, drug and alcohol abuse (MartinHoward, 2022; Allie, 2021; Atmore, 2012). This is evident in the words of the parents as they explain their daily struggle to make ends meet, often being drawn into activities that take them away from participating within the ECCE centre, even though they would like to participate regularly.

> [PI 1] *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…I did not dedicate a lot of my time, and I'm sorry for that.*

> [PI 5] *My kids, because I am alone…if I ask someone to look after her then you must pay that person. I am unemployed…I want to do many things, but I can't because I have four children and for me it is like I wanna go but there's no one to look after them.*

> [PI 6] *Sometimes because most of the parents, some not most, some other of them they drink and they really get involved in that.*

> [PI 3] *I try to give my kids the best that I can. Most of the time I am not available because I work, not full time.' I am basically never around to help or put a hand in.*

The words of the parents provide insight into the harsh realities they live in and how they struggle to find time and money for childcare to participate in the setting (Ashley-Cooper, 2021; Munje & Mncube, 2018). The teachers are aware of these challenges and continue to provide support and caring to the families. The ongoing support is valued by the parents but is not always enough to encourage meaningful participation from the parents. Hickman and Matlhape (2021;60) suggest that participation may occur more readily if parents can choose how they would like to participate. This idea aligns well with the Freirean concept (1998) of open conversations and dialogue to avoid a prescriptive approach to parent participation. The ECCE centre continues to offer events and meetings to encourage collaboration and community building and parents value these opportunities.

> [J 2] *I'd like to give more of my time, maybe more activities in future. I'd love to do it more often, with different class activities. It's really fun.*

> [J 1] *The teachers is learning the kids very good, and it feels good seeing parents working together.*

The teachers play an important role in supporting the families by responding to their needs to build a supportive community (Martin, 2021). The challenges parents have may leave the teachers feeling unsupported by the parents. As an ECCE centre there may be an element of frustration that parents are not always available. Although teachers may feel a level of frustration, Boyle, et.al. (2018:191) suggest teachers recognise the importance of continuing to encourage parents to participate as it will develop a sense of interconnectedness within the community of the centre.

The NGO that supports the centre has created mechanisms for the teachers to reflect on these frustrations. This support can also help nurture the professional identity of the teachers through discussions and collaboration with the NGO to consider how they can encourage parents to take ownership of the setting and have a voice (Bipath, 2022). Encouraging open communication and compassion are vital in these moments. Providing reflective opportunities for the teachers allows them to acknowledge the diverse range of families in the setting. This approach helps develop a flexible approach building opportunities for communication and avoiding a generic expectation of how parents participate (Baxter & Kilderry, 2021). The teachers can also recognise that their tolerance for the struggles parents face does not imply they are acquiescing to the needs of the parents, but rather this approach builds respect within the community (Freire, 1998:42).

The nature of the challenges parents and teachers manage will help develop a true community of practice where every voice contributes to supportive participation and understanding. In

building a community of practice there is an acknowledgement of the evolutionary stages of transformation (Wenger et. al., 2002:68). The teachers and parents can find common ground to create connections by creating the space for parents to have a voice, despite their personal circumstances. Providing the opportunity for reciprocal dialogue builds trust and confidence between the teachers and the parents based on responding as equals (Van Laere et.al., 2018). One teacher described the school *'as a lighthouse in the community'.*

This vision of the ECCE centre may appear to be a lofty ideal, however the ongoing support that occurs between the teachers and the parents as they work together for the good of the children, builds a community of practice that can become the centre of this community in Lavender Hill. Positive relationships between the parents and teachers create opportunities for meaningful support of each other (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019: 175). It is vital that the teachers also have a voice and are not seen as the sole custodians of the community functioning effectively. Creating these spaces requires regular, consistent dialogue where challenges and successes are acknowledged. O' Keefe et.al (2022) encourage ECCE centres to be inclusive and provide equal opportunities for participation and engagement as this supports the development of quality within the centre.

5.3. Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented an insightful inductive analysis with the intention of elevating the voices of participants to explore parent participation in one ECCE setting. Three prominent themes emerged using rigorous manual coding methods aligned with principles of reflexive thematic analysis: **Participation as connection**, **Participation as empowerment** and **Reflection on participation**. Each theme is supported by sub-themes that provide answers to the guiding research questions regarding understandings, implementation, and development of parent participation.

The first theme reveals how connections amongst parents and teachers are built through relationship building, open communication and supporting each other. Feelings of trust and belonging contribute to a supportive community where all stakeholders feel valued in contributing to the setting and wider community, creating a sense of interconnectedness.

The second theme highlights how beliefs support and practically shape the implementation of participation for parents and teachers. Findings allude to deficit views of parents that need to be challenged to provide a more inclusive approach to participation by embracing the strengths and skills parents can contribute. Teachers are also encouraged to educate parents on aspects of the schools' educational pedagogy to create continuity between home and the setting. This theme also explores how participation supports communities of practice underpinned by dialogue and mutual learning.

The third theme considers how critical reflection on efforts to encourage participation allows for an understanding of historical legacies while moving towards a more democratic and

equitable, humanising pedagogy within the ECCE centre. Continued reflection enables teachers and parents respond to potential barriers and provides the room for ongoing nonjudgmental support whilst maintaining a participatory approach.

Ultimately, the findings emphasise how consistency in relationship-building amongst parent and teachers is beneficial for all, fostering caring communities focused on community wellbeing and agency. Parent participation through democratic practice is possible as all contributions are encouraged and valued. Participation that is supported by non-judgemental and respected approaches allows people to share their ideas and experiences, which includes using these to improve participation in the ECCE setting. However, acknowledging the profound realities and challenges faced by the community requires intentions for parent participation be met with practical strategies that respect all within the community.

Chapter 6 discusses how the themes presented answer the research questions. It will also provide significant considerations for how the ECCE centre can co-create a model of parent participation by building a community of practice based on personal agency, democracy, and respect. This ensures the bespoke model for parent participation acknowledges both the community and the individual. The co-construction of a model for parent participation is explored and developed in chapter seven.

Chapter 6 Summary of main discussion

6.1.   Introduction

The discussion provides the opportunity to explore the data and address the research questions, keeping the theoretical and conceptual framework at the forefront of this exploration. At the core of parent participation is the desire to strengthen the community by providing personal agency within the ECCE centre. An awareness of where the power lies with the intention of empowering everyone is a key aspect of transforming the community in the setting. Supporting the development of voice through democratic practice using a collaborative approach supports the concept of a community of practice building on the notion of ubuntu, as discussed in chapters two and three.

6.2.   Revisiting the Research Questions

Whilst generating knowledge based on the data collected, I ensured I referred to the research questions and the aim and objectives of the research. Co-creating a model of parent participation that is site specific relies on developing an understanding of the approach and insights parents and teachers, in this one setting, have towards meaningful and democratic parent participation. Once this is established it becomes possible to construct a community of practice that can also transform and strengthen the Lavender Hill community around the ECCE centre.

During data analysis process I was mindful of holding key elements of the theoretical and conceptual framework at the fore. The intention is to ensure the voice of the participants forms the basis for the data analysis. Fulfilling the mandate of a humanising pedagogy guided my efforts to upfront the knowledge and experiences of all the participants. I also wanted to ensure the various forms of data addressed the research questions.

The research questions provide the opportunity to understand how individuals within the community experience parent participation from the perspective of being a parent and a teacher. These experiences, intentionally or unintentionally, inform participation in the ECCE centre. The individual experiences provide information on how parent participation can be enhanced and developed based on these experiences. Knowing how the participants experience and understand parent participation helps create a community of practice. Developing a social framework of participation supports democratic and dialogical conversations based on personal experiences and opportunities to participate. Oostdam and Hooge (2012) describe this as the chance to share responsibility for the children and the setting through cooperation and consultation. These dialogical conversations also help explore the ethos and approach underpinning the ECCE centre as they interact and build relationships with the parents and families. Having the participants voice at the centre of this research reflects the participative pedagogy that forefronts these individual and community voices.

6.3. Research Question One

> **Research question one**: What understandings exist in the setting about parent participation?
>
> **Objectives**: 1. To explore parent understanding of participation.
>
> 2. To explore teachers' understandings of parent participation.

The intention of Question One is to gather data on personal experiences and understandings of parent participation, including how their past experiences inform current practices within the ECCE centre. If the setting is considered key to supporting and developing parent participation it is a good idea to have open and meaningful communication (Oostdam & Hooge, 2012). Knowing how parents and teachers understand participation influences their expectations of each other. Teachers and parents have their own experiences and perspectives that influence how they participate (Keyes, 2002). These personal experiences either support and encourage ongoing participation or detract from participation. Personal understanding of the value of parent participation impacts the quality of the relationships parents and teachers have with each other, either encouraging or discouraging participation in the ECCE centre (Smith et.al., 2022). Understanding what influences parent participation is aligned with Formosinho and Formosinho's (2012:8) first axis of being and feeling. Individual identities can be developed with others in the community which helps break down barriers and develops a group identity. Insight into personal knowledge and understanding of parent participation informs what influences the bespoke model of parent participation for the setting.

6.3.1. Question One and Participation as Connection

Understandings of parent participation are based on building relationships between the adults to benefit the children and the community of the ECCE setting. The participants understand that being connected to build a community means they work together and not in isolation. The benefit of significant connections is best illustrated by a parent who wrote in her journal that she experiences happiness in her relationship with the teachers.

> [J 1] *It made me feel very happy because you don't really get people [who] really cares for parents like [these] teachers.*

Connections occur in a community of practice where people have a shared identity and learning is considered a social process (Farnsworth et.al., 2016). Creating a sense of belonging by supporting each other through relationship building helps provide a base that supports the children socially, emotionally and academically. Belonging and participating includes learning about each other and embracing similarities and differences (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012:9). For the ECCE centre to be successful and provide successful education, there needs to be effective communication between the setting and home (Seitsinger, 2019). The adults in the ECCE centre appreciate and value the contributions made to building the community around the child. The teachers and parents have a shared responsibility for the

decisions they make to support the children and the ECCE centre and dialogical relations ensure this occurs (Freire 2005:80).

> [PI 4] *Ok, uhm, they're [the school] trying their best, they give you a lot of options, they are here to help us by making it more easier and that, that makes me getting involved. Yeah, yeah, they helped me a lot in that process that we were talking now about, personal things, yeah. There were there for me and they're still there.*

Individual participation helps develop social practices where personal understanding of the needs of the community provide opportunities for discussions between the individual and the community (Billet, 2007:59). Developing a community of practice involves getting to know each other and valuing all contributions made to the setting. Open communication and listening to each other to know where support is needed adds value to the community. Having conversations with parents and listening to their stories and experiences transforms the parent-teacher relationship (Freire, 1998).

> [PI 4] *Whatever they need to ask me, I'm busy now trying from my side as I see the grass and stuff. I was trying to get hold of someone, and I was trying to get hold of someone and uhm, and to help me because it doesn't, for me it's here is children, it doesn't look properly, nicely and if I can give the plants some water and the garden. I came a long road on with them doing workshops. I was dealing with C [workshop leader], I learnt really a lot with them so, yeah Doing workshops with them, yes, I am always determined. Helping out and participating in activities.*

Strong communication provides clear expectations of what is needed to support the community through collaboration. They also build the relationship between those who are experienced and those who are new to the community (Billet, 2007:62). Parent participation is understood as creating a sense of belonging where everyone feels part of the community as they collaborate to create a cohesive community. This happens through conversations that foster and support common goals with every contribution being valued.

6.3.2.   Question One and Participation as Empowering

The beliefs and perceptions that exist influence parent and teacher understanding of the value of their participation in the setting. Parents' perceptions about their participation in the setting include knowing their contribution and involvement helps create a community that is connected and socially cohesive through interactions (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012:4). Making changes to what takes place in the setting occurs through a conscious change of practice and social relations that supports the empowerment of the community (Torres, 2014). Learning about and from each other strengthens the connection between home and the setting as a common approach is created towards the children.

[TI 4] *So, I would say that that's basically what I would encourage, an opendoor policy to getting them involved and then basically you know, yeah, so that's what I would say. I think the main benefit is that the child will benefit from it a lot because then the same sense of education that he receives at school would initially be the same thing that he would receive at home. Because if there's an open-door policy and then the parent initially see how the child is being treated by the adult within the environment of the class, it will basically, how can I say allow the parent to do introspection based on, versus how the teacher is versus how I'm with my child at home.*

Through openness to learning from each other a shared responsibility provides a sense of personal agency amongst the stakeholders in the setting. Empowerment of the individual occurs when there is an understanding of the value and support each person brings to the ECCE centre. This approach aligns with ubuntu where opportunities for participation creates solutions that work by acknowledging the contributions made to the community (Freire, 2017:89). Parents learn about how they can contribute to their child's experiences, making pedagogical connections between the setting and home. Knowledge and respect are essential to empowering participation in the setting through dialogue that helps participants appreciate and understand the role they have in creating lasting change within the community (Irwin, 2012). Teachers can learn from the parents and encourage their contributions for the betterment of the setting. These equal contributions add value to the setting by empowering participation. Formosinho and Formosinho (2012) view this level of participation as participants co-constructing the environment. This has the potential to ripple into the wider community where all know their personal experiences can and do contribute to the wellbeing of the ECCE community. Teachers' perceptions that it is their responsibility alone to decide when and how parents participate in the ECCE centre challenges the notion that all are empowered. Settings can increase passivity of parents and this needs to be addressed to support parents and teachers working together and making decisions within the environment (Irwin, 2012:55). To ensure all are empowered to participate an awareness of potential barriers should be acknowledged and addressed.

6.3.3.   Question One and Reflections on Participation

Reflecting on personal understandings of parent participation creates an opportunity for all participants in the community to check in with each other. As a community of practice, the ECCE centre benefits by reflecting on the strengths, challenges and relationships within the setting and how best to avoid being exclusive and exclusionary (Wenger et.al., 2002). Reflecting includes developing an understanding of how one's own role models for parent participation impact current experiences of participation. Reflection relies on communication and aligns with Formosinho and Formosinho' s (2012:10) third axis of participation of communication and exploration.

[TI 3] *The need for communication between school and home to be consistent around what the child is learning and what the child can do at home. [Having an] open door policy to getting them [parents] involved. More of initiating [by the school] to build an environment where the parent understands what is happening in the school and feels they have value and can contribute to the school.*

Reflection provides the space for intentionality within the ECCE centre by providing the space for developing a purpose (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012:31). The benefit of reflecting on these experiences helps to create change and hopefully improves how one participates. Teachers need to reflect on their expectations of how parents participate and what they can do to support participation. Equally, parents should reflect on how they participate and the expectations they have of the teachers and the setting to support them and their children. It is important that parents and teachers do not view themselves as better or different from each other, but rather see the value in the contributions they both make within the setting (Freire 2005:90). Reflecting on how connections are created and supported include considering who has power in the relationship and how this is addressed (Hughes, et.al., 2007:4). Understanding how to best support the setting and the children requires the adults to consider the daily challenges faced that may impact participation. These daily challenges can influence how the participants perceive their participation and can create a disconnect between expectations of parents and teachers.

6.4. Research Question Two

Research question two: What experiences exist in the ECCE centre to support parent participation?

Objectives: 1. To understand how parents participate in the daily life of the ECCE centre.

2. To explore how teachers encourage practical parent participation.

Question Two provided the opportunity to consider practical aspects of how parent participation takes place daily, weekly and monthly within the setting. Creating opportunities for conversations and interactions is suggested by Formosinho and Formosinho (2012:11) in their fourth axis of creating meaning through sharing information. Gaining insight into ongoing activities within the ECCE centre that encourage and support parent participation helps develop a sense of how parents know they can be practically helpful supporting the setting. Encouraging parents to be part of the ECCE centre gives them insight into the values the teachers embrace and builds a community of practice (Kassen, 2021; Boyle et.al., 2018). Considering the practicalities of parent participation includes an understanding of how the centre encourages parents to participate and what tools are used to support knowledge of the value of parents participating on an ongoing, regular basis (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022). However,

just because parents are *expected* to be practically involved does not mean they all are, or that the ECCE centre values the participation and this needs further consideration. An awareness of the daily pressure parents are under may have an influence on how often they participate in the centre (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). When the teachers share their needs, the parents are empowered to know their practical support is valued. This question also provides an opportunity to explore expectations of parent participation based on personal past experiences of their own parents being involved in their schooling. It is important to be aware of parent responses to how they are practically involved in the setting as teachers then know how they can transform these experiences into meaningful participation as they reflect on their own expectations of parent participation. A dialogic approach to participation ensures domination and control does not occur as all stakeholders create a preferred way of functioning (Freire, 2005:89).

6.4.1. Question Two and Participation as Connection

Exploring practical aspects of participation helps clarify the contributions parents believe help support connections making them feel welcome and connected to the ECCE centre. Formosinho and Passos (2019) allude to organisational parent participation as including parents in the activities and decisions as part of the ECCE centre. Parents are comfortable being included in practical aspects of the setting and value being able to help maintain the environment their children spend their days at.

> [PI 7] *It hasn't made you 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.*

Connection occurs when opportunities to engage, communicate and learn are provided, bringing people from the edge of the community of practice towards being a core member of the community (Wenger, 2008). The teachers and the NGO support parents practically by offering workshops and helping meet individual needs where they can.

> [PI 3] *They do sometimes fund raising, and they will also have meetings with parents, if they wanna do something and ask for opinions or like advice or ask them what we think they can do to to sometimes make it safer or better, or what I can do to raise money or whatever for the kids.*

Working together encourages parents to make contributions that are valued by the teachers and provide opportunities for community building. When parents are encouraged to express their ideas, their passion should not be misinterpreted as an attempt to control, but rather an opportunity to connect and contribute to the ECCE centre (Irwin, 2012). Providing opportunities to share knowledge and experiences helps develop opportunities for connection and a common sense of identity within the ECCE centre (Wenger et.al., 2002:5). Open and honest

communication about the practical support the parents and the teachers require supports building strong relationships where all feel valued and appreciated for their contributions.

> [PI 5] *Yes, it's, it's, it's important because why sometimes you don't understand like at school then you can ask your parents to help you with your schoolwork because sometimes for me it's better to be honest, like when you come out of school, can you tell your parents what did you learn and then they know now you learn at school.*

Encouraging participation helps create connections between the children, the parents and the teachers (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Open communication and collaboration occur symbiotically where parents feel valued and teachers know they are supporting the families of the children in the setting. Any contributions to the daily running of the setting are appreciated and valued as all work together to support the children.

6.4.2. Question Two and Participation as Empowering

Empowering parents to participate practically within the setting begins with communication that encourages sharing both personal experiences and ideas. Encouraging involvement and interaction creates a shift in responses and expectations as value is placed on individual contributions to the whole community (Wenger, 2008). An awareness of the pressures parents and teachers face provides an opportunity for all to contribute and support when and where they can. The benefit of offering the support helps empower the parents as they feel they are making a positive contribution to the setting for their children's benefit. Empowering the ECCE community provides the opportunity for curiosity where participants in the community are encouraged to investigate and discover why things are the way they are and whether they would like to make change (Freire, 2017).

> [SD] *Through the activities of our prepared Montessori environment the children acquire a sense of "I can do this"; and go from strength to strength, becoming more independent, thus enhancing their self-esteem. In addition to working as individuals they also work collectively, socialising, chatting and sharing their experiences and thus learning what it is to be part of a group.*

Acknowledging personal challenges that may impact parent participation provides an opportunity for the community of the ECCE centre to encourage and offer support by valuing the skills everyone has. Valuing any contributions towards the setting creates a network of parents who feel empowered and valued through individual contributions. The interests of the families should be at the heart of the ECCE centre by embracing their contributions and world views instead of trying to make the parents adapt to the requirements of the setting (Bello, 2023:228). Supporting participation that empowers the parents happens when awareness of personal aims, goals and interactions occurs and all are respected (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012).

> *[TI 4] So, at the end of the day, they can say that I contributed to that instead of just being distant to the school and just dropping off the child and they go, but really working with the teacher to ensure that all the needs of the child is being met whilst even being at school.*

Empowerment of the participants in the ECCE centre occurs by being open to learning from each other and valuing the contributions each can make. The teachers are encouraged to be a positive role model to the parents, reflecting the values and ethos of the setting. Creating empowering participation does not need to be teacher-directed, but rather have a constructivist approach where the voices of the parents are included and valued in the creation of the community (Huang et al., 2019). Parents are empowered to make personal contributions based on their skills and abilities. Through the connections made, teachers also know what support each family needs. Working together helps create an understanding of the roles each play in the ECCE centre and creates a sense of ownership where all are valued for their support of the setting.

6.4.3. Question Two and Reflections on Participation

The ECCE centre operates within a community that faces various challenges which have an impact on parent participation. Reflecting on the benefits and challenges of parent participation is fundamentally important to supporting both the families and the setting. There is a need to take personal and community challenges and lived experiences into consideration, contemplating how to help and support families practically to create the opportunity for participation in the setting.

> *[PI 1] I think I must just put more time into participating at the creche because it's gone do my child good because even though she came out of her shell, it was really… terug getrokke (withdrawn) like, she didn't participate and stuff but when she is here at creche I started noticing how she changed, the changes and I actually want to be part of that also. So, if she is gonna change more for a good reason.*

Providing the space for dialogue and reflection creates a unifying and democratic pedagogy (Torres, 2014). Parents and teachers can reflect and discuss what needs to be created to support effective participation in the ECCE centre. It is beneficial to reflect on the value parents bring to the day-to-day running of the centre as it provides a space for relationship building through activities that support ongoing connection and learning (Hughes, 2007: 31).

> *[TI 4] So, the benefit would be that the child might receive much more out of the parent at home then what he gets, he obviously gets nourishment and care here but necessarily can't say that's what he gets at home. So, if the parent is involved and participate here with the child, at home the participation involvement itself would initially increase as well.*

Reflection on how participation occurs needs to be non-judgemental if it is going to be important and genuine. It is beneficial for both teachers and parents to reflect on the challenges of participation in the setting as well as how participation can provide a sense of community and security for the families. When parents have taken the time to understand the daily running of the ECCE centre, they could reflect with the teachers to question and challenge what takes place within the ECCE centre as they have personal knowledge and experience (Freire, 2017:132). Providing the circumstances for conversations establishes a community of practice where joint responsibility for participation is supported. Reflecting on how to encourage and support participation should happen regularly and provide opportunities to adapt to the needs of the families in the ECCE setting.

6.5.   Research Question Three

Research question three: What policies and procedures support parent participation?

Objectives: 1. To review the ECCE centre parent handbook and policy guidelines

2. To explore what policies support parent participation in the setting.

As policies and procedures are used by settings to create a plan of how the ECCE centre runs, it is important to explore how they support ongoing significant parent participation. Policies can create accountability for parents and teachers, as well as being used to analyse how the policies work in practice. The policy documents also provide the opportunity to create a form of dialogue between the theory and practice of the ECCE centre with opportunities for reflection (Freire, 1998). Wenger (2008:58) describes policy documents as the 'reification' of thoughts, ideas and approaches into something concrete which compliments participation in a community of practice. Policies are also established to value the role of the parents and teachers working together to support children's learning (Bayat & Madiyibi, 2022). The policies present the guidelines for parent participation, but there may be an assumption that parents have read the policies and know how they can participate (Sang & Syomwene, 2018). This setting has a variety of policy documents aimed at the parent body in general, as well as setting expectations for the ECCE centre staff of how they interact and respond to parent participation. For these expectations to be met it is important to ensure that procedures and policies supporting parent participation are not vague and are open to being challenged through effective dialogue (Kambouri et.al, 2021).

6.5.1.   Question Three and Participation as Connection

Building relationships is central to the ECCE centre and parent participation is a key element of this. The policy documents of the ECCE centre provide detailed evidence of the importance of open communication and collaboration.

> [SD] *Parents will be required to attend a parent evening once a term, in creating the best support for your child through both the school and*

yourselves. Please ensure that your child has predictable routines and structure at home with proper bedtime routines.

This approach offers support and a consistency of approach between the setting, the families and the positive impact this can have on the wider community. If the policy documents of the setting reflect the participatory approach parents and families are more likely to feel they are allowed to belong and participate in the setting (Formosinho & Passos, 2019:313).

> [SD] *We encourage and expect families to appreciate that school involvement creates community support and understanding.*

A clear outline of how parents and families can participate is provided with many options provided of daily activities and school events that require parent participation. As the policy documents are created by the setting, clear communication needs to occur to ensure parents know they have the power to collaborate with the teachers in the setting. Collaboration and connection occurs when teachers acknowledge they do not have exclusivity over the educational process in the setting and that parents value being included in policy decisions (Irwin, 2012). The intention of creating connections between the families and the setting also supports a link between the pedagogy of the setting and the home as parents are encouraged to adopt a similar approach that builds a community of shared practice.

6.5.2. Question Three and Participation as Empowering

The importance of parents participating in the day to day running of the setting is well documented in the setting policies. Parent participation supports and empowers parents by valuing the contributions they make. Empowering parents to participate benefits the children and the setting encouraging democratic dialogue and mutual goals for education (Irwin, 2012). The ECCE centre policy documents provide clear guidance on the variety of roles and responsibilities for parents in the setting.

> [SD] *We encourage and expect involvement in management of school by offering skills and talents beneficial to building a supportive community. This entails fundraising, maintenance, gardening, and creative insights and attendance in parent and educational events.*

The roles and responsibilities of the teachers is also clearly outlined. Teachers and parents are valued for the contributions they make towards learning together, whether this is about the needs of the children at home and in the setting, or how to participate in the setting on a regular basis. The policies provide information on how the parents and school can learn together and develop a cohesive approach to support the children as well as influence the community around the setting. Knowing the pedagogical approach of the ECCE centre also empowers parents to participate as they understand how they can be supportive (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Opportunities for being practically involved are embedded within the various policy documents.

> [SD] *Each year parents are asked to serve in managing a portfolio and we ask that you assist with this in your time as a parent at the school.*

A potential challenge with the policy documents is that they have been created by the setting with little obvious collaboration from the parents. Consideration needs to be given to the role the policy documents have in possibly creating a form of oppression to control the power and voice parents are allowed in the ECCE centre (Lateka, 2023).

> [PI 1] *I did participate in the gardening, the cleaning of the garden and then uhm, when there is events and stuff, then I will come. But I did not dedicate a lot of my time.*

> [SD] *Parents are expected to be involved through the contribution of their own special skills and talents with the children.*

The expectation that parents who cannot pay fees are required to contribute their time is also evident within the documents. Although this is valuable and acknowledges potential financial challenges, it may appear too prescriptive and limiting without acknowledging the daily struggles parents face. These ECCE policy expectations may be considered undemocratic and prescriptive if they are not created through dialogue with the parents regarding how they are able to support the ECCE setting (Shaik, 2024:1). Developing an awareness amongst the parents of the need for the contribution and social responsibility towards the setting is valuable but may be misconstrued as a judgement (Freire, 1998). Empowering the parents in this community can occur through relationship building where they play an active role in the setting and are not expected to be passive members within the setting (Lateka, 2023).

6.5.3. Question Three and Reflections on Participation

The policy documents reflect the intentions of the ECCE centre to create opportunities for participation of parents and teachers to work together, building a socially cohesive community. The benefit of parent participation is connected to the benefits the children will have where all the adults collaborate to support each other and the children. Reflecting on the current policy documents includes being able to make changes within the existing structures and rethink more powerful ways of providing opportunity for new ideas and possibilities (Irwin, 2012).

> [PI 4] *Yeah, yeah, they helped me a lot in that process that we were talking now about, personal things, yeah. There were there for me and they're still there. I want to have the best for my children.*

The ECCE centre must reflect on the policies they use, remembering that their design and implementation is based on personal understanding, perspective and beliefs (Wenger, 2008). The documents reflect the importance of teachers providing practical and educational support to the families. Parent knowledge and experiences are also evident in the policy documents and reflect the value placed on their contributions. The teachers should reflect on the role the policy documents may have in increasing parent passivity and aim to include information on

the value of ongoing dialogue and democratic relationship building (Irwin, 2012). Reflecting on the policies enables parents and teachers to have a clear understanding of how participation can improve through ongoing dialogue.

> [SD] *Parent contact is vital to your child's development. We appreciate that school involvement creates community support and understanding.*

The opportunity to reflect on existing policy documents also provides the space to consider how past practices and expectations may still exist within the planned new approach to parent participation (Freire, 2017:98). A challenge with the policy documents is that they are generated by the setting without parent consultation and make assumptions about how parents should participate in the setting. None of the parents interviewed mentioned the policy documents, although they all speak about participating in the centre. Clarity about whether parents read and understand the policy documents needs to be reflected on. Parents may not be aware of how they can participate even though the documents provide clear information.

6.6.   Research Question Four

Research question four: What value do participants place on parent participation?

Objectives: 1. To explore the value parents place on their participation in the ECCE centre.

2. To explore the perceived benefits of participation for the ECCE centre.

To avoid making assumptions about parent participation, it is beneficial to inquire about individual perceptions of the value they attach to parent participation. In low SES settings there tends to be limited access to ECCE and parent participation in these settings is valuable in supporting both the children and the teachers in the setting (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020). If participation is highly valued by the community of the ECCE centre, it is possible that parent participation will occur naturally and be well supported and encouraged. Supporting parent participation implies the ECCE centre values the parents' insights, knowing they have their own abilities to think, plan and contribute towards a transformation of the community (Freire, 2005:66). In cases where parents perceive their participation as being a burden on them and the teachers, they may not want to be part of the ECCE centre as they feel they are getting in the way. This would impact meaningful parent participation as parents don't believe they have a role to play, and teachers experience parents as a potential 'nuisance' to be kept at arm's length. Valuing parent participation encourages parents to be actively involved in the setting by participating in both volunteer activities and decision-making processes (Oostdam & Hooge, 2012).

6.6.1.   Question Four and Participation as Connection

The value of connecting through parent participation helps create a social community with common goals. Encouraging participation aligns with Formosinho and Formosinho's (2012)

second axis of identity where bonds of belonging and participation are based in recognising similarities and differences, whilst promoting connection between the families and the setting. The teachers and parents value personal experiences that build relationships and connection through dialogue that helps all to act and create change within the environment (del Carmen Salazar, 2013:127).

> [PI 5] *If want to share something feel can come to the teachers and speak to them. Like I said, when they come and ask me to do something then I do it.*

The children are at the heart of the community and when parents know their voice is valued, they are more inclined to offer support to the setting. Valuing parent participation has the benefit of strengthening the community as everyone is connected by creating the best possible space for the children to grow and develop. The desire for parents to connect with each other and the teachers is the opportunity to share experiences, problem solve together and offer support, especially to overcome challenges within the community (Marlow et al., 2024:92). A humanising pedagogy and dialogic approach supports relationship building and makes use of the lived experiences based on the cultural resources in the community (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). As a contributing member of the community, self-confidence grows as awareness of the individuals in the community includes respecting them and valuing their uniqueness through interactions that support connections (Billet, 2007:56). Collaboration is valued as skills are shared and developed between the parents and the teachers as they learn from each other.

> [PI 6] *The teachers here they actually listen to what the parents say.*

> [TI 3] *All I want is for parents to know what is happening in the classroom, they must have an idea. In the classroom, it would benefit a lot so that they know what's happening. Yeah.*

Building a community of practice creates connections within the ECCE centre through two-way communication that supports opportunities for collaboration that becomes self-sustaining (Wenger, 2008). When teachers and parents support each other with mutual respect and open communication, they become the role models of how a community can work together. This has the potential to ripple into the wider community as the ECCE centre role models collaborate by valuing all participation and strengthen the links between the setting and the home. Connections are valued as they align with the principle of ubuntu where all are valued for their contribution and support, without judgement.

6.6.2. Question Four and Participation as Empowering

The success of the ECCE centre is based on ongoing participation that values the input of parents. Having parents and families participate in the ECCE centre supports the development of cultural dialogue which has the potential to empower families (Formosinho & Passos, 2019). All are empowered as they are open to learning from each other to align their understandings

and beliefs to build a community of practice. To consider how people may feel disempowered, recognition must be given to the impact of past experiences. To support empowerment, it is important to recognise the effect power can have on silencing participants (Farnsworth et.al., 2016:154).

> [PI 3] *so I always feel left out even with the programmes at [my]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. I don't like talking about it because it makes me feel… and I don't like feeling that way because at this moment I tried to give my kids the best that I can and not what I couldn't have.*

Conversations need to occur that consider how hierarchical structures within the setting can impact opportunities for learning and empowerment within the community. Empowering those within the community of practice requires all to think about how people interact and work together. Doing this facilitates the elimination of power hierarchies as value is placed on collaboration where people are free to ask for help and support from those within the community (Engström, 2007:36).

> [TI 3] *The parent doesn't know what actually is happening. So that's why we must first explain to them about the materials… and then when they know what's happening, the idea here in the classroom then maybe afterwards they can observe. It will benefit uhm, the child, the parent and the teacher.*

Valuing the rights of everyone to participate in the setting creates connection and co-construction of the community (Formosinho & Passos, 2019:325). If the ECCE centre encourages parent participation as it values their skills and experiences, they can contribute to the day-to-day running of the setting. When people are actively involved in understanding and exploring their reality, they are more likely to take ownership and responsibility for it, valuing what it is and make changes as required to strengthen it (Freire, 2005:106). Respecting knowledge based in personal experiences has the potential to make the ECCE centre progressive as it acknowledges the context and cultural setting (Freire, 2017). This approach builds trust and understanding and values the voice of the parents to create lasting social networks. These networks value children being at the heart of the setting and provide opportunities for ongoing learning for parents and teachers.

> [PI 4] *but I'm trying my best because why there's coming functions up now. What was the function we had here, that was our first thing, we were putting… and we tried our best and I was so excited Mandela Day, in what month was that now, here was something. Youth Day. Yeah, we were so excited because we were walking in the rain and looking for sponsors, you know who can help us. We want to do it for our kids.*

Parents build their reality based on their personal circumstances of their daily lives and are empowered to share these experiences with the ECCE community (Bello, 2023). Using lived realities and learning together helps create a connection between the ethos of the school and what takes place at home. As the setting is considered pedagogically different from the experiences parents may have had at school, value is ascribed to empowering and supporting ongoing learning. The value of empowering parents to have a voice and participate is firmly rooted in providing the best opportunities for children to be successful and achieve what parents feel they had missed out on, given the environment they live in.

6.6.3.   Question Four and Reflections on Participation

Encouraging parent participation in the setting provides the opportunity to build relationships by reflecting on what is needed to support the community of the setting and the wider community around the setting. Relationship building is possible through reflections on the experiences all in the setting have and experience (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). It is important to take the time to reflect on what is needed within the community and within the individual families within the ECCE centre.

> [PI 1] *I think there's a lot of benefits, like, yeah there is a lot of benefits but just the survival part for me it's gonna get in the way. So, if I dedicate my time to the school then I'm not gonna be able to do it at home but there's a lot of benefits. Yeah, there was a lot of benefits when I started here before my child came to creche.*

When members of the community reflect on their situations and their realities, value is placed on what works well and challenges passivity to change (Freire, 2005:108). Participation or non-participation in a community of practice is associated to knowledge and experience, where participants are valued and defined both individually and as part of the community (Wenger, 2008). In turn this affects how the individuals view themselves and how the ECCE centre is supported.

> [PI 1] *And even though there is problems at home they encourage me to come and talk to them, so that it won't affect the child also but they're really supportive, that I can say.*

> [TI 3] *But I'm sure they won't mind to be 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.*

Reflecting on how to support each other also provides the space to create equality amongst all participants in the ECCE centre, where all voices and ideas are valued. Allowing space for reflection on how things are done in the setting helps provide space for transformation encouraging debate and dialogue (Torres, 2014). This approach helps consider what changes

need to take place to improve participation and ensure all voices are heard. As a community of practice, those in the setting should expect some level of disagreement as an element that will strengthen the community as it avoids passivity and adhering to the status quo (Wenger, 2008).

> [PI 7] *The benefit of this is that… how can I now say… Dit lyk soos ons (it looks like we) parents is uhm, almost like we grow with our children.*

The participants in the ECCE centre must reflect on the explicit and implicit constraints they face and the impact they have on the community, holding each other accountable (Wenger, 2008). There are clear links made to the value of reflecting on how links between home and the setting support stronger interactions that benefit the children. The socio-cultural experiences of the community provide wisdom that helps move the community forward by reflecting on and acknowledging the influences that create and support the community (Freire, 2017). Parents and teachers take the time to reflect on how their experiences and insights allow them to learn from each other and become mutually supportive.

6.7.   Research Setting Experience

As stated in Chapter 4, the co-construction of a parent participation model was inspired by the results of the work done during the data collection phase of this research project. However, before exploring how a model of parent participation can be used in individual ECCE centres and schools, I would be remiss if I did not share the outcome of the AI where the parents and teachers collaborated to create an initial approach to parent participation in their own setting. Presenting the parent participation vision they created recognises their agency, having collaborated based on personal experiences and knowledge to develop parent participation that is appropriate and relevant to this specific setting. Aspects of the visions are discussed as part of the findings and discussion; however, I wanted to take the opportunity to include the result of the collaboration of the setting. The outcome of the AI provides evidence of the eagerness parents and teachers to work collaboratively, listening to each other. It reflects ubuntu and social cohesion by building a community that encourages personal agency and cooperation for the benefit of all.

The visons that each group and then the entire parent body created are valuable as they provide evidence of working as a community of practice with flexibility to adapt and change as required. The visions created also provide evidence of the strength of collaboration, where discussion and agreement resulted in an agreed plan of participation in the setting. Once agreement was reached on expectations for parent participation, ongoing reflection, as suggested by Lowe et.al. (2013:3), will uncover strengths and challenges to gain a balanced overview of progress. Reflecting on how parent participation occurs in the setting allows for open discussions about what has worked and what has not been successful and why. This setting is well positioned to engage in parent participation as they make use of open

communication and collaboration. They employ the model to ensure each element is addressed to achieve a preferred vision within the setting, for parent participation. All the vision statements have elements (figure 6.1) that are practical, offering hands on support and being physically present to support the teachers and children.
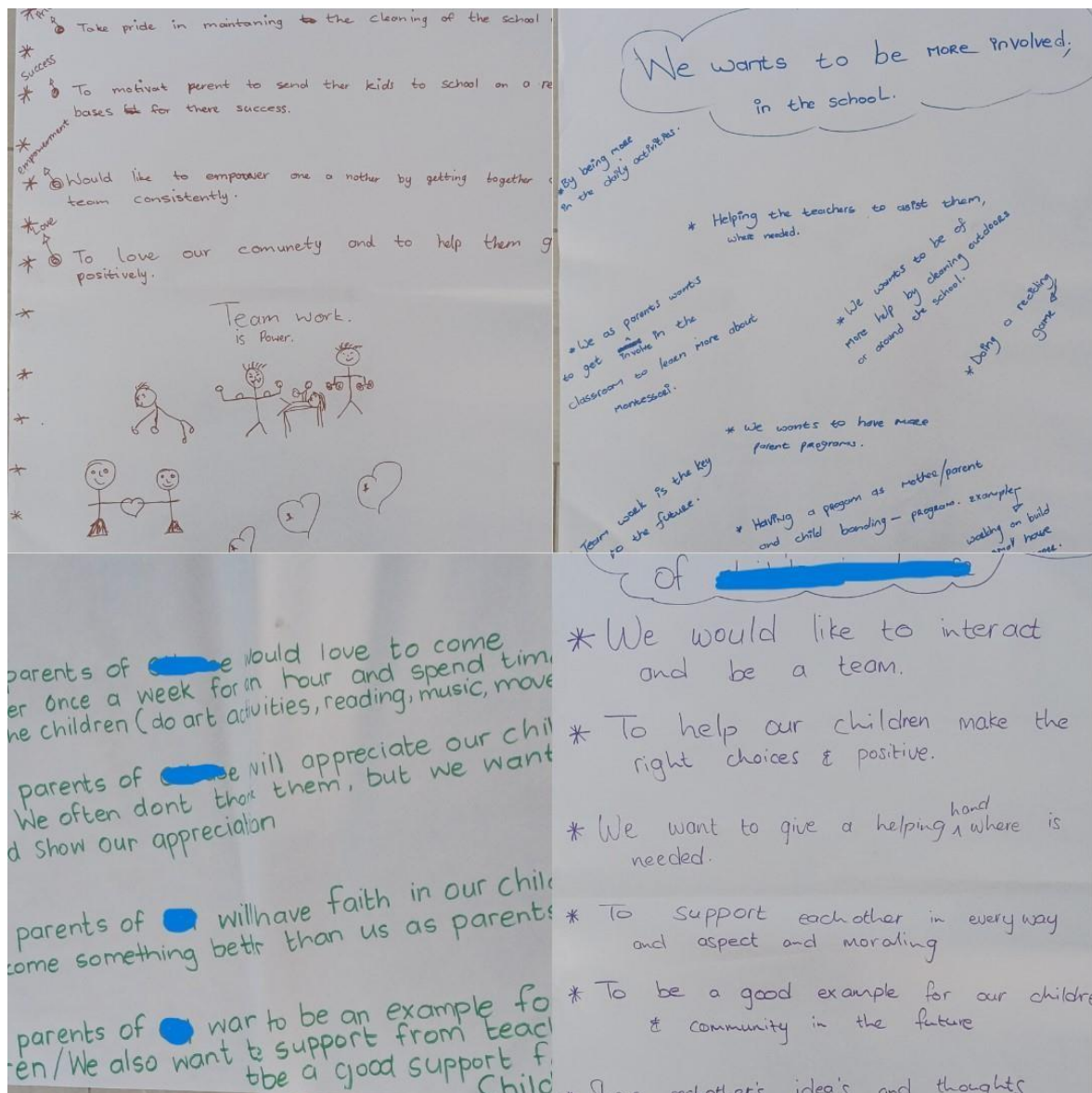
Figure 6-1 Group Vision Statements

The parents and teachers collaborated in groups to create their vision statements. All the statements have generated elements that are practical, offering a democratic approach (Freire, 2017:133), offering hands on support and being physically present to support the setting by *'taking pride in maintaining and cleaning the school, being part of daily activities.'* The group visions also include valuing the importance of the role parents have (Latecka, 2023:636) in supporting the children and the community by *'motivating parents to send their children to the setting; being involved in the classroom to learn more; having faith in the children to become better; and supporting teachers to be a good support for the children.'* Working together (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012:10; Wenger, 2008:6) and being available to the setting daily was described as *'teamwork being key for the future through interaction;*

spending time with the children doing classroom activities; helping the community in a positive way; and *using the parent voice sharing ideas and thoughts to be a good example to the wider community and the children.*' Foregrounding the realities of the community is central to creating the space for collaboration (Fuller, 2007:24).

Following the AI process, the ECCE community collaborated to create one shared vision statement (Figure 6.2) that they would use to hold each other accountable. Doing this aligns with taking shared responsibility for the children and the setting (Krijnen, et.al. 2022: 265). The vision statement is a preferred way of working as a community and relies on commitment from all who created it. The commitment to the vision occurs with ongoing sharing of ideas and problem-solving to explore ideas and make progress (Wenger et.al., 2002:4).

> *We the community of CH will support and inspire, to set a good example to our children.*
>
> *We of CH parents want to get more involved, be consistent in parent programmes.*
>
> *We as CH parents will love, help, support and have teamwork.*
>
> *We as CH parents and teachers will always try and give our children the best education, motivation for a better nation.*

Figure 6-2 Whole ECCE Setting Vision Statement

The vision statements created as part of the AI lay the foundation for how the setting included ongoing parent participation as a modus operandi. The intentions of the parents and teachers were simple and realistic and may be construed as idealistic. The ECCE centre is still in an experimental phase working with the vision they created, and I continue to liaise with the principal

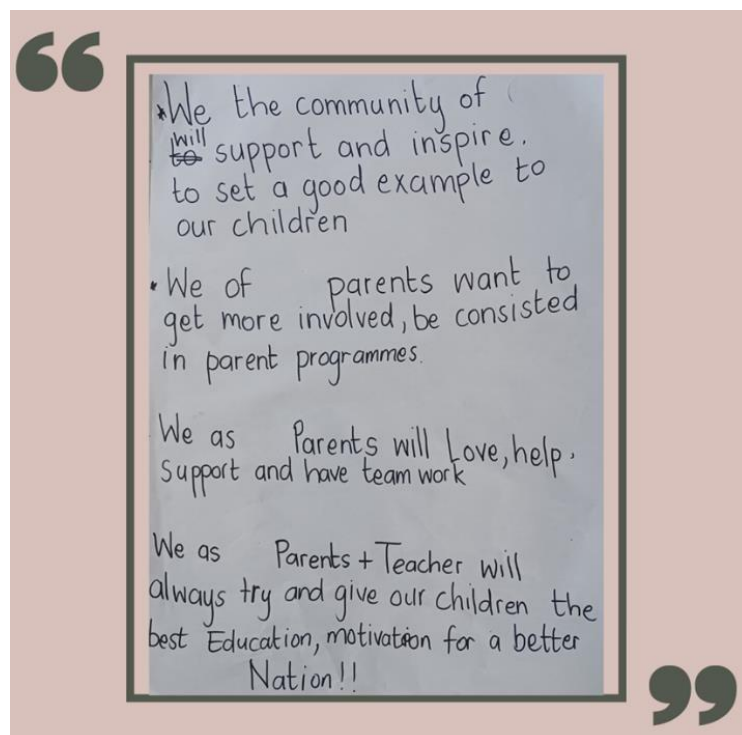and teachers to discuss the ongoing experiences of parent participation. A result of the data collection process was the empowerment of parent voice within the setting, with the teachers encouraging deeper participation as they observed the strengthening of the community both within and around the ECCE centre.

This is where the role of reflection and discussion becomes important. It was also important for me to communicate with the setting on a regular basis, offering support through discussions and reflecting on how the model for parent participation is being implemented in the ECCE centre. Providing support aligns with the AI approach where regular check ins provide the opportunity for the community to have external support. This is especially valuable in settings as families and teachers join and leave during the school year, creating new and different opportunities for relationship building and parent participation as part of a dynamic community of practice (Laluvein, 2010:187).

Co-constructing parent participation is discussed by using the proposed model in chapter 7 with parents and teachers collaborating to create a shared vision and sense of accountability within the ECCE setting. As the parent body changes annually and teachers leave the setting, this shared vision needs to be shared with incoming members of the community and reflected on regularly to ensure it aligns with the changes within the community. The proposed model of parent participation will be explained in depth in this chapter to explore aspects that need to be addressed for the model to work effectively within individual settings.

6.8.   Chapter Summary

The discussion explored the research questions based on the conceptual framework provided in Chapter 3. Building a community of practice based on shared understandings, valuing individual experiences and approaches provides the opportunity to transform the ECCE setting into a socially cohesive and democratic community. As parents and teachers naturally move away from the setting, these experiences move with them and have the potential to influence the community they move to.

Personal understandings and experiences influence the expectations people have of each other. This can be supported by collaborating with each other through conversations to create a sense of belonging through shared identity. Being intentional involves empowering everyone by avoiding exclusionary practices and rather appreciating the lived experiences of all to build the community offering support by learning from and with each other.

Interactions and shared experiences naturally support valuing each other within the community. Teachers and parents value the experiences each has asking for help and offering it, when it is needed. This includes sharing personal and social challenges to support each other. Valuing everyone's experiences also provides opportunities for all to contribute to the life of the ECCE centre. Being able to ask for help and support creates connections and limits

one group or person dominating as all experiences contribute and encourage joint responsibility for the community.

The policies created are the opportunity to plan, providing guidelines and accountability for those in the ECCE community. There is also the opportunity to revisit existing policies to create a consistency of approach within the setting. The policies include having mutually beneficial goals that includes the voice of all the stakeholders through dialogue. It is the opportunity to provide clear links between the setting and the families in the setting as values and approaches are aligned as roles and responsibilities are determined.

The values of the setting include acknowledging the insights and contributions of all the stakeholders. The setting values the individual within the community which creates social cohesion through common goals that strengthens the community. Dialogue is encouraged to explore similarities and differences creating connections between those in the community. Common understanding is non-judgemental and establishes a sense of empowerment of the individual supporting equality. An inclusive community is established through strengthening others and valuing individual knowledge and contribution.

Establishing a democratic and inclusive community requires active participation through collaboration. Having a shared identity occurs through open, non-judgemental communication, providing the space for inclusivity and equality. Democratic approaches happen through dialogue that values the individual and the group to co-construct and strengthen the immediate community of the ECCE centre and then expand into the wider community.

Chapter 7 A Participatory Parent Model

7.1.   Introduction

The findings and discussion in the previous chapter provided the opportunity to both understand and explore parent participation and how it occurs within one ECCE centre in Lavender Hill, based on building a socially cohesive community of practice. Through the research process the ECCE centre co-created a model of parent participation pertinent to their unique space. Co-creating a model of parent participation allowed the voices of all within the setting to be heard as they collaborated in constructing a participatory ECCE centre. The findings also provided the opportunity for me to develop a model of parent participation based on this experience of co-creating parent participation. Using these experiences during the research process, this chapter presents how the ECCE centre parents and teachers collaborated to develop a participatory approach that strengthens and values parent participation in the setting and how this also benefits the wider community. The potential model for parent participation is explained in detail with the intention that schools and settings can use this potential model to implement their own unique setting-based approach to parent participation.

7.2.   Creating Opportunities for Parent Participation

Effective relationships in educational settings assists in moving parents and families from being outsiders to partners and has the potential to transform experiences for parents, children and the setting (Seitsinger, 2019:164). It can be argued that children and families who stay at the same ECCE setting for more than a year benefit from greater participation within the centre which has a positive impact on creating stability for the children and the centre as well. The proposed model for parent participation is founded in relationship building and communities of practice, where the shared interests are upheld and collaboratively supported with an ethics of care (Noddings, 2015:73). This takes diligence, care and time and cannot be viewed as a 'quick fix' as there is the ongoing requirement of relationship building and support within the community.

Synthesising the discussion thus far, the model of parent participation suggested here is founded on the key themes and sub-themes discussed in Chapter 4. During the research process, the stakeholders had the opportunity to co-construct a model of parent participation within their setting. Using the ideas shared, a generic model that any ECCE centre or school could use was developed creating an agentic and democratic approach towards participation. The underlying intentions and principles of the model is to avoid enacting a hierarchical approach where the power can often rest with the few.

7.3.   Contribution of the Study

7.3.1.   Reviewing Existing Parent Models

Chapter 2 provided insight into three models of parent involvement and how they can be used by settings to prompt parents to contribute to the success of the setting. Epstein's (2019) model allows parents to decide the aspect of involvement they would like to be part of. A focus of the model considers what parents do in relation to monitoring child participation in school activities (Pope, Vance Randall & Owens, 2024:174). The model acknowledges the importance of the relationship between school and home; however, the focus tends to be about what is best for the school. Fenton et.al. (2017:217) reflect on Epstein's model (2002) as maintaining a separateness between the parents and school which could create animosity. There appears to be a hierarchy of participation potentially having a deficit view of parents as they are encouraged to make changes to their involvement by aligning what takes place at school with what they do at home. As described in Chapter 2, parent involvement ranges from ensuring homework is completed and volunteering, to parents being part of decision-making in the school. However, this is only available to a select few parents who are described as 'parent leaders.' This limits the voice of every parent as only a select few become decision-makers (Shaik, 2024:7). It also brings into question how some parents are chosen as leaders and alludes to where power within the ECCE setting lies. Addressing issues of power allows for collaboration that supports working towards common goals and reducing hierarchy within the community (Jevtić, 2023:129).

Collaborating with the community appears to consider how the community can contribute to the success of the school and does not appear to include aspects of how the school can support the community being successful. This approach does not provide the opportunity for a symbiotic relationship and appears to be one-sided, with the needs of the school being more important than the needs of the families and community. Seitsinger (2019:169) alludes to the links made between family involvement and the impact it has on the school being considered successful. Overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2002) addresses the natural connections between families, the community and the school which assists to develop an understanding of how the three can work together, but it does not address where decisions are made or where the power lies in each of these spheres. Challenges may occur within individual settings when creating opportunities for parent participation and these need to be addressed and resolved to ensure participation is successful. The model of parent participation proposed in this research intends to create the opportunity for equality and social cohesion by viewing all contributors to the setting as having value and being an asset.

Addressing communication and how it occurs was central in Keyes' (2002) model of participation by initially acknowledging the role of beliefs and values held by parents and teachers. This model focuses on the social systems of the parents and the teachers and the struggle that may occur in finding common ground. Good communication includes having a common understanding, shared interests and appropriate responses to requests (Orberg et al., 2024:4). The model relies on teachers initiating communication based on aspects they consider important for parent-teacher partnerships. Although this model is less hierarchical, it does focus on the role of the teacher as the initiator of interactions with an awareness of social and cultural influences on the setting. It requires teachers to be trained to work with families and be sensitive to influences on parents as they may conflict with teacher expectations (Nutbrown & Cook, 2023: 68). The model proposed in this research acknowledges the role teachers have in providing the initial opportunity for parent participation. There is no intention to view the social and cultural influences of families as a deficit or challenge to participation (Bettencourt et.al., 2020:4). Rather the intention is one of inclusion and acceptance of the strengths and challenges all participants bring to the setting. Equity and shared responsibility are central to the proposed model.

As the most recent exploration of parent participation, Kambouri's (2021) model values the contributions parents make to the setting. A search to review the implementation and use of the Café model (Kambouri et al., 2021) was inconclusive and there is no clear indication that the model has been used post-Covid. The central tenants of the model include communication and offering support for effective collaboration. Families are valued for the contributions they can make to the setting and teachers are encouraged to build relationships that foster trust (Janssen et.al., 2012:391). Parents and teachers are encouraged to work together but it does not provide detail of how this would occur, or what consideration needs to be given to

opportunities for meaningful collaboration and community building. The proposed model of this research intends to include practical aspects for collaboration and parent participation that enables families and the setting to participate from their strengths and then support each other in areas that are a challenge.

Co-constructing a model of parent participation encourages schools/settings to democratise the community with the intention of empowering everyone through dialogue and collaboration. The objective is to develop a truly democratic community within the setting/school which expands into the community around the school/setting and builds an agentic and socially cohesive society. Due to the rhizomatic nature of schools/settings, the absence of a linear and top-down approach provides the opportunity to build a democratic society (Humphreys, 2013:192). Parents and teachers naturally move into and out of academic spaces, taking their personal experiences with them and these experiences merge into the new spaces.

7.3.2. Designing a Parent Participation Model

The existing models (Kambouri et al., 2021; Epstein, 2019; Keyes, 2002) are based on the school being the instigator of parent involvement with the responsibility of maintaining and drawing parents into the setting, often using protocols based on the needs of the school. A collaborative approach to parent participation occurs when all stakeholders in the setting are considered valuable contributors. There is awareness that individuals within a group are likely to hold a variety of experiences and opinions, with these views being acknowledged and valued. The richness of individual experiences is represented and used in discussions as the community of practice includes all voices democratically. This also supports the notion of building a community that is socially cohesive in its approach to parent participation within the setting. The co-creation of a model of parent participation based on interactions between parents and teachers helps create common goals and social cohesion through a community of practice created by all the stakeholders in the setting. Opportunity to focus on areas of strength and concern encourages community problem-solving and opportunities for change, as needed.

7.3.3. Utilising the Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Proposing a model of parent participation that democratically includes the voice of all stakeholders and focuses on building a community within the setting is guided by the theoretical and conceptual framework of this study. The proposed model of parent participation is based in an agentic and democratic framework that challenges roles and potentially hierarchical approaches of ECCE settings/schools. Valuing the contributions of every member of the community empowers the whole community to contribute meaningfully and presents a positive, democratic role model for the children.

The conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 3 provides the foundation for developing a model of parent participation co-created with the parents and teachers collaborating, using a

humanising pedagogy (Freire, 2005). Approaching the parent participation model from this pedagogical outlook provides the opportunity for knowledge sharing, developing shared interests and identifying, whilst valuing personal experiences and knowledge (Wenger, 2010). Active co-construction of the model encourages inclusivity and equity of all stakeholders and supports an interconnectedness within the community (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Building the community through the co-creation of parent participation is embedded within ubuntu by regarding one's own contributions and the contributions of others as valuable and beneficial to the immediate and wider community (Bangura, 2005).

7.4. Proposed Model

7.4.1. Considerations

At the outset the idea of co-creating a model of parent participation occurred when a deficit view (del Carmen Salazar, 2013:124) of parents not being interested in ECCE centres was highlighted by principals at an ECD forum meeting in Lavender Hill. Employing Formosinho and Formosinho's (2012:9) approach to participation creates a sense belonging by valuing and respecting parents and families as an asset to the setting. Opportunities for community development through personal agency depends on parents having a sense of belonging (Zinn & Rodgers 2012:84). Schools and settings may be content with the approaches they use and may not feel the need to make any changes to parent inclusion in the life of the school and maintaining the status quo is sufficient. In the interest of democracy, the model presented is the opportunity for ongoing discussion and not a directive.

The intention is not to force a parent participation model on any educational setting, but rather to offer an option of meaningful participation that aligns with the intentions of a new, democratic South Africa. It provides an opportunity for parents to be part of the life of their child in early childhood and beyond. The model presented here intends to move away from models that are school-centric with a focus on the needs of the educational setting (Baxter & Kilderry 2021:3). The intention is to strengthen the community within the setting as well as benefit the wider community building on concepts of democracy and ubuntu.

Figure 7.1 is a diagrammatic representation of the model of parent participation. Creating the diagram was the opportunity to provide a representation of parent participation as interconnected and infused spheres. The boundaries of each sphere overlap as each sphere influences and supports the other. Each aspect of parent participation; connection, empowerment and reflection are interconnected and no one aspect is more important than another. The spheres are nestled in a robust foundation of the pedagogical core of parent participation. The model is built on a foundation of shared understanding where personal beliefs and approaches to education are explored and discussed to find a common approach. Building on the work of Kambouri et al. (2021), I include credible areas for development of each sphere of parent participation.
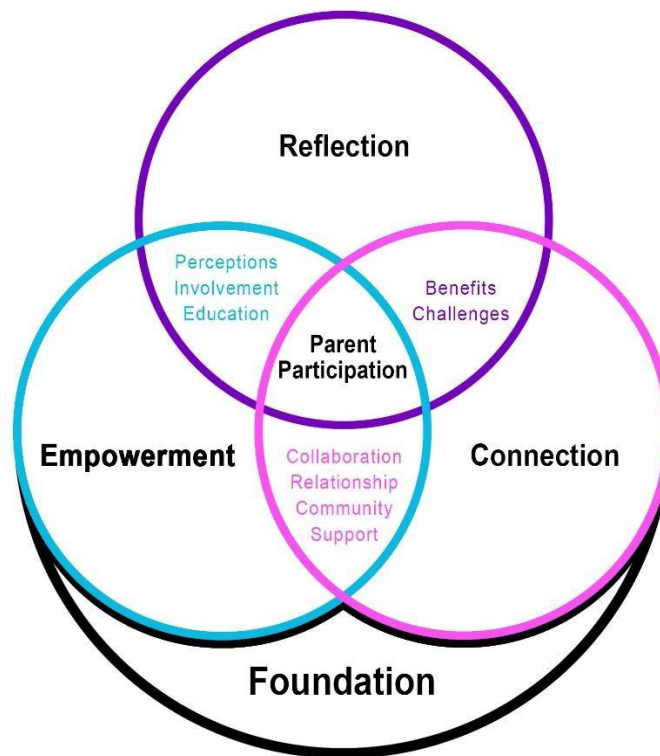
Figure 7-1 Model of Parent Participation

The visual representation of the model features parent participation in the centre, relying on connections, empowerment and reflection for successful participation. The interconnected nature of the model allows for effective parent participation as part of a democratic community of practice. The model is nestled within a structure as the foundation for participation. The foundation is the valuable core of philosophy and personal pedagogy that views all contributions as vital to the building a socially cohesive community. For successful parent participation settings focus on forming connections, creating opportunities for empowerment and reflecting on what is working well and what needs to be developed. Each of these aspects will be discussed in this chapter to provide guidance towards best practice in co-constructing parent participation that is site specific.

7.4.2.   Foundations for Parent Participation

The intention of nestling the model of parent participation in a strong pedagogical foundation provides a base to work from. This base is the opportunity to align personal and professional pedagogical approaches. It is borne out of the realisation that one of the strengths the ECCE centre for the research was that all the teachers had been educated to use a specific pedagogical approach based in equality and mutual respect. The pedagogical and

philosophical approach of the setting requires community and social cohesion as a starting point. A feature of Montessori pedagogy is the importance of establishing strong home-school partnerships to avoid a dissonance between home and school (Walls 2018:15). The teachers take on the responsibility of educating parents about this pedagogical approach with the intention that it becomes a new way for the wider community to engage with each other (Montessori 1974:71). Educating the parents on the pedagogical approach of the setting is not without challenges, as it may conflict with the lived realities and experiences of parents in the community. Creating understanding of the pedagogical approach needs to include a valuing of the knowledge and experiences the parents have, their personal pedagogies, and then finding a way to align the two pedagogies.

Initiating successful parent participation begins by providing the opportunity to understand and explore individual pedagogies, which may be unconsciously developed through experiences, with the intentional pedagogy of the ECCE setting. Open dialogue provides a platform to explore personal pedagogies relating to parent participation. The findings in Chapter 5 addressed role models and the influence they have on parent participation. Parents may not be aware of their beliefs operating unintentionally due to the experiences of their own parents' interactions with the school (Jevtić 2023:130). Equally, the teachers may have expectations of parents based on what they have learnt in their teacher training programme, and this may conflict with expectations parents have to participate, or not. An awareness of differing pedagogical approaches should not be ignored or overlooked but valued as an opportunity to support each other through open communication to find common ground (Archer, 2024). Creating the opportunity for collaboration includes considering pedagogical approaches that may be in conflict between the setting and home. The teachers and parents can find an ideological common approach to working together and with the children. Doing this aligns with a humanising pedagogy that is based in the community aligning social and historical thought to create participative spaces (Freire, 2017:18) Finding common ground that supports personal agency is valued within the community is the foundation of developing a model of parent participation. Initiating conversations and building a socially cohesive community that support the individuals is important when creating democratic spaces to flatten hierarchies (del Carmen Salazar, 2013:131). In the co-creation of a model of parent participation engaging in dialogue with all stakeholders builds respectful practice as personal experiences and knowledge are valued and contribute to the community. When all are seen as equal contributors to participation ubuntu is enacted and collaboration becomes an integral part of the ECCE centre (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013:99).

The foundation of creating site specific models of parent participation is developed through ongoing dialogue with all the stakeholders in the ECCE setting. There is no hierarchical system that discounts the parents' voice. This is developed using a Freirean approach to dialogue that goes beyond maintaining the status quo to allow thought and action to work together through

mutual trust (Bello, 2023). Maintaining the status quo may be appealing as it could be perceived as being easier than engaging in dialogue that explores change to what is known and experienced and initiate change (Irwin, 2012:35). The suggested model supports a better understanding of systems and processes within the setting/school which leads to a transformation of these very systems to include the whole community.

The principal and teachers are part of the school environment before parents are. Due to the nature of the school or ECCE centre set up, they would be responsible for initiating the conversation around parent participation by inviting parents in. This may unconsciously raise issues of where the power within the setting lies (Cox-Petersen, 2011:190). Over a period, the principal and teachers build individual relationships with the children and the parents through open, reciprocal communication (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022:470). Once a relationship has been built the family begins to feel part of the community of the ECCE centre and is encouraged to participate and share their own experiences and knowledge with the centre.

For parent participation to be successful, the setting/school sets the foundation that builds on a democratic approach, as illustrated in Figure 7.2. Exploring and familiarising each other with personal and professional pedagogies is cyclical in nature due to movement of families and teachers leaving and joining the ECCE centre as this is the nature of schooling as children enter and then leave when they start formal schooling.
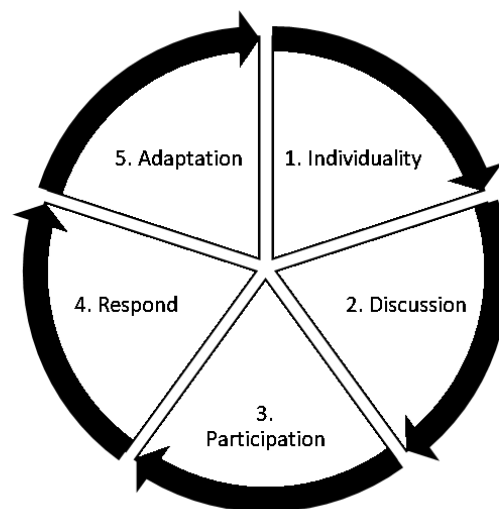
Figure 7-2 Foundational Approach

At the start of any family's journey in the ECCE centre, the teachers and principal establish a relationship with each family member. Acknowledging **individuality (1)** provides the opportunity to learn from each other and value what everyone has to offer based on their experiences. It is an acknowledgement of personal humanity, and the value all bring to the centre. Acknowledging individual beliefs and experiences also provides the opportunity to build a community with common approaches. Appreciating individuals provides opportunities to initiate relationship building that supports the community.

Once the relationship is established, engaging in meaningful, democratic **dialogue and discussion (2)** supports individual agency. At this stage there is an acceptance that the world views and experiences of the family are valued as part of the centre. Appreciating individual experiences and learning from these provides a sense of equity and inclusion.

Parents are then supported to engage in meaningful **participation (3)** within the ECCE centre where they are afforded opportunities to share thoughts and ideas, as well as listen to the ideas of others. Participation includes being practically involved in the setting which supports meaningful dialogue and ongoing learning as improvements and changes are made. This process may take time as parents settle and start to feel comfortable and accepted within the setting. The principal, teachers and families are encouraged to reflect on the levels of participation, dialogue and relationship building.

At this stage **responding (4)** to the ideas and needs of individual families within the community and the needs of the school provide opportunities for the community to support each other. Opportunity to reflect is important to adapt and make changes as necessary to improve the quality of parent participation.

Being able to **adapt (5)** also ensures the status quo is not maintained out of habit. Aspects that work in building a community of practice are built on and areas that need to be improved on are highlighted.

Each of the suggested stages of the foundation for parent participation ensures there is constant, ongoing connection between parents and teachers that encourages participation. The voice of the parents is as valuable as the principal and teachers in the ECCE setting (Knoche et.al., 2015:386). Employing this approach lays the foundations of the model of parent participation that is embraced by the whole ECCE centre/school. The nature of movement within settings requires the foundation to be an iterative process and cyclical, ensuring that new members of the community are invited to share their experiences and learn from each other. An iterative process can be described as an evaluative opportunity to consider how participation occurs, what the influences are and how interdependence between the ECCE centre and the parents is supported (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972:13). This also provides the chance for parents to engage in any aspect of the model they feel comfortable with, before moving onto other aspects of the model as they become more engaged in the setting.

7.4.3. Connection

Connecting with members of the setting is vital to co-constructing parent participation. At the outset it is acknowledged that relationship building and creating sustainable connections takes time. All stakeholders in a setting are encouraged to look for opportunities to establish meaningful connections. The parent-teacher relationship has the potential to break down cultural barriers as connections are established (Chan & Ritchie, 2016:290). Connections occur when time is spent getting to know each other without judgement. Offering support and

opportunities for collaboration values the cultural capital of the community, building on the strengths and valuing the voices of all in the setting (Jevtić, 2023: 133). Supporting the setting includes being approachable and caring with an awareness of the needs of the community. Creating connections through relationship building includes knowing where support is needed, knowing the challenges individuals within the community face and being flexible to avoid judgement by offering opportunities for all to participate. Establishing an approach that creates a community of practice occurs when trust is at the core and stereotyping of individuals within the setting does not occur. The boundaries of each sphere are porous; however, there does need to be an awareness that parents may be part of more than one sphere. Jewson (2007:75) reflects on tensions that may occur when this occurs in a community of practice and suggests that there needs to be communication, and a bridge created to ensure the community benefits from multiple interactions across the spheres. Based on the foundations that have been determined there is an awareness of where the power lies within the setting and having a personal approach that values all is central to equality.

7.4.4. Empowerment

Opportunities to be part of the daily running of the ECCE centre, as well as being part of decision-making upfronts the value of ubuntu to create social cohesion within the setting. Shared interests and responsibilities go beyond focusing on the academic life of the setting and supports individual contributions to the success of the setting within the community (Modise, 2022:290). Being encouraged and supported to contribute to the daily life of the community of the ECCE centre values the cultural capital of each parent and family and is an asset- based approach that empowers the stakeholders. Every effort is made to overcome existing authoritarian approaches towards the community through building relationships based on equity and democracy (Freire, 2017:158). The ECCE centre is not considered more important than the parents as communication allows parents to know what is taking place in the centre and how they can contribute meaningfully through decision-making, as well as creating a strong connection between the setting and the home. Teachers view parents as the knowledgeable other regarding their children and use this knowledge to support the child in the setting which creates a power balance between the setting and the home (McQuade & Stewart, 2023: 277). Empowering the parents through the contributions they make is valuable to the children as they see their parents as part of the setting. The implication of this level of empowerment is that as the parents move their children into formal schooling, they take this pedagogical approach with them and have an expectation of being included in the life of their child at school. This positive role modelling of parent participation can influence the wider community as they take these experiences with them into the new school environment (Pope et.al., 2024:173). Ideally there is potential for collaboration between ECCE centres and schools within the community, as discussions are possible regarding how to maintain parent participation and build on democratic principles as espoused in the various DBE policy documents.

7.4.5.   Reflection

Reflection provides the space for new ideas and approaches with the opportunity to create longevity and sustainability of parent participation. Ensuring a participatory approach remains at the core of the setting relies on open communication, a reflection of practices and relationship building on a continuing basis (Harrison & Madingoaneng, 2022:472). Reflecting on aspects of parent participation supports making change and building on practices that are considered valuable. A benefit of this is that, as parents and teachers move into other educational spaces, they take these experiences with them. A further benefit of this movement is the chance to pass on democratic, communicative practices to other parents and teachers, both within the immediate setting and then into other educational spaces (Kustiani & Fauziyah, 2019:49). Providing opportunities for reflection on the benefits of parent participation empowers the community to sustain aspects that are successful. In turn, reflection becomes an approach that is used in other settings and helps build from within, bringing new approaches to the wider community making it collaborative, socially cohesive and inclusive (Modise, 2022:297). Employing a democratic approach within the ECCE centre has the potential to influence other educational settings as families and teachers take their knowledge and experiences with them (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022:9). This assists to establish social cohesion within the community as pedagogical and philosophical approaches move with them to new spaces and hopefully these are shared as it is natural for parents to participate, and teachers have the expectation that parents participate willingly.

It is further important to reflect on how stability is established and maintained within the setting, even though there are times of change. Stability ensures a common sense of purpose, and the benefit of change is the need to reflect on what works well and where change needs to be created (Dewey, 1916:145). Reflecting on the benefits stability offers the opportunity to consider whether the status quo is being maintained out of habit. The suggested parent participation model encourages reflection to adjust what takes place in practice within the centre, offering the opportunity to consider the impact of families and teachers moving into and out of the ECCE centre.

Figure 7.3 below presents the practical implication of using the model effectively. Each educational setting will employ their own approach to co-creating parent participation based on their needs. Creating the space for meaningful parent participation takes time, relying on the commitment of those in the setting to work together by connecting in significant ways. This approach creates a link between what is happening in the setting and the contextual realities (Zinn & Rodgers, 2012:83). As the model is bespoke within each setting, how each ECCE centre or education setting incorporates these aspects will be based on dialogue and interactions with those in the community.

Figure 7-3 Practical implication of model

7.4.6. Applying the model in the setting.

In chapter 6 evidence was provided of the individual commitments parents and teachers had made towards the shared vision of parent participation in the ECCE centre (Figure 6-2). I have maintained contact with the principal and teachers as they reflect on changes that have occurred within the ECCE centre in terms of parent participation. They are open to parents participating meaningfully within the setting and have commented on the value the AI workshop brought to the community to encourage dialogue and community building. I have not met with the parents again and have planned to organise a reflective session with the stakeholders of this ECCE centre.

7.5.   Contribution of the Study

Baxter and Kilderry (2021:3) suggest the concept of parent participation in the educational life of their child may originate in white middle-class settings. The implication is that parent participation does not account for the experiences and lived realities of parents in low socio-economic areas like Lavender Hill and are marginalised. Shifting this thinking aligns with democratic practice and provides all stakeholders the opportunity to make choices about how they would like to participate.

This parent participation model presented is a strengths-based approach to working within the ECCE community or school. Trust and open communication are the core of any decisionmaking regarding how parents and teachers will participate (Cox-Petersen, 2011:111). Valuing all knowledge and experiences means parents and teachers can participate from their sense of comfort or strength, moving into less comfortable areas as their confidence develops. When parents participate, the children feel happier and more settled in the ECCE centre and

this becomes an incentive for the parents to keep participating (Formosinho & Passos, 2019:313).

The model presented values democracy and personal agency as parents and teachers have the space to share their knowledge and experiences which empowers and builds the community. Whilst aligning personal and professional pedagogies the opportunity is provided for agreement that all are open to learning from each other and sharing their personal knowledge. Anyone can start at any place in the model if there is agreement that all areas will be explored as a community of practice over time.

Presenting a model of parent participation is intended to create a shift in how individuals within the ECCE centre view their contributions. I am deeply aware that linked to this move is a shift in personal pedagogy regarding the role participants have in the setting.

7.6. Considerations when Applying the Model

7.6.1. The Participants

Mokibelo (2022:42) describes teachers as responsible for supporting change within the ECCE centre. The suggested model of parent participation aims to democratically shift this burden of responsibility to include parents as well. The intention is to transform the relationship between teachers and parents, promoting democracy by working together and challenging existing knowledge and power by creating equitable and inclusive relationships (Hughes, 2003:269). The intention of the model is not to have one specific sphere as a starting point, but to rather provide options for where individuals feel comfortable to participate initially. This model is not a linear approach. Rather, it allows for individual decision-making by moving between the three spheres to create understanding and partnership (Hancock & Cheatham, 2021:68). Individuals have the choice of working as part of a community of practice by choosing an area where they feel comfortable. Participating from a personal point of comfort assists to support an assets-based approach as people in the setting contribute towards participation based on their individual strengths and beliefs (Dewey, 1916:16). Being allowed to make personal choices empowers all stakeholders within the setting, as they do not feel obligated to follow suggestions. In addition, starting at a point of comfort builds confidence and assists individuals feel valued for their contribution to the community (Mayaka & Truell, 2021:651). Being free to choose what aspect of participation to start with creates a sense of connection with aspects that matter most to the individual and as confidence grows, movement to areas of learning are less daunting. As a deeper sense of community grows the porous nature of each sphere allows for natural freedom of movement between all three spheres. The core of the model is participation. To ensure participation, it is necessary for each of the areas to be addressed. One area of the model cannot dominate as it would create imbalance.

7.6.2.   A socially Cohesive Community

The nature of ECCE centres and schools is that families and teachers move in and out of settings over time. There are multiple entry and exit points in a child's school journey. Points of connection are created through relationship building and communication (Humphreys, 2013:193). The process of ensuring meaningful contributions and participation requires the core members of the community of practice to connect and reflect to ensure that parent participation is taking place within the setting. Ensuring the foundation of the pedagogical approach is at the core of the environment and parents who join the ECCE centre or school know what the expectations are.

When new parents join, they bring their own experiences and knowledge. Kustiani and Fauziyah (2019:49) include factors that may impact parent participation to be their level of education, social relationships and the needs of the community. Providing opportunities for collaboration and social cohesion requires teachers to be aware of these factors by listening to parents and gaining insight into their perspectives to encourage participation (Li et.al., 2020:334). The role of empowering parents to share these factors is important, as well as providing opportunities for them to learn from those in the community. Central to transformation and social cohesion is the experienced person being able to guide the novice. There should be interactions between the individuals that have been in the setting for a while and the new families coming in as this assists to support transformation and transitions (Laluvein, 2010:180). Collaboration relies on the teachers and parents communicating regularly to have a clear understanding of the needs of the immediate school community (Knoche et.al., 2015:372). As families and teachers move out of the setting/school they take their experiences and expectations of participation with them into new settings/schools. The intention is that the lived experiences of participation become the modus operandi within the new spaces, creating a ripple effect that builds a democratic approach within the wider community.

7.6.3.   Dialogue and Reflection in Participation

Clear communication is a vital aspect of the parent participation model ensuring all feel heard and understood. If parents don't believe they are being understood and listened to communication may break down (Kambouri et.al., 2021:3). Effective communication requires an open approach to ensure all are understood and intentions are clear. A dialogic approach to parent participation also supports individual agency for all in the community (Freire, 2005:65). Opportunities to share experiences and ideas builds an asset-based community of practice where those with similar interests support each other and share their ideas (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020:162). In multilingual and multicultural settings, it is important to consider potential language barriers that may stifle effective communication (Pope et.al., 2024). Valuing the cultural wealth of the parents supports collaboration as every effort is made to include all stakeholders in creating a shared vision and partnership establishing ownership and commitment within the community (Krijnen et.al., 2022:268).

7.6.4.   Strengths and Challenges

Strengths of the model include viewing parents as equals within the setting allows them the opportunity to share their knowledge and skills with new families joining the setting. The model is not prescriptive and allows all the stakeholders to participate in areas they feel more connected to initially. Working as a community of practice helps create opportunities for individuals to contribute to areas, they feel comfortable, moving onto other aspects of participation as they feel comfortable in the setting. Ensuring parents take ownership of participatory practices to maintain dialogue and building a community of practice will strengthen an approach to passing on good practice to new parents and give momentum to parent participation within the setting. Providing the opportunity to co-construct a participatory model encourages individual agency which can ripple into the community as families move into other educational settings, taking their experiences with them and continuing to participate in the educational life of their children.

A limitation of the model is an awareness that meaningful and ongoing parent participation takes time and is also based on the pedagogical approach of a setting. It may be a challenge to maintain an ongoing commitment to open, democratic dialogue and parent participation. This may have to be initiated by the principal and staff as new parents join the setting. As parents learn to be actively part of the ECD community, they then take on responsibility for their part in initiating dialogue with the teaches and other parents. Waning participation in the ECD setting is an aspect that needs to be considered by the principal and teachers to ensure that parents are encouraged to maintain their commitment to the setting. The movement of families into and out of the setting provides the opportunity to embrace new ideas and commitments; however, a challenge to this is the ongoing changes may dissipate the voice of the parents as the teachers take on responsibility for sharing the information with new families. This is where a community of practice can work together and the need to provide insight and information is not the sole responsibility of the teachers.

7.7.   Chapter Summary

The parent participation model presented is informed by the key themes and sub-themes of this research. The model is couched in the foundation of the ECCE setting as the starting point to consider pedagogy and approaches to parents and families. This is a move from the school-centric approach of existing models of parent involvement with the intention of participation being central to how parents are valued within the setting. This approach is a shift in the status quo and assumptions made about the contributions parents make to the life of the ECCE setting. In this model the voices of all are valued and included through interactions, interconnectedness and relationship building. The setting/school may initiate participation, but this is non-hierarchical and based in a community of practice that ensures open dialogue which is central to the setting, ensuring all are valued. Personal and professional pedagogical approaches provide opportunities for inclusion, equity, respect and care. Doing this supports

connection, empowerment and reflection within the ECCE centre with the ability to influence the social community encouraging democratic dialogue that challenges the status quo and creates opportunities for social change and transformation.

Chapter 8 Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings with recommendations of how ECCE centres, schools and communities can democratically collaborate to co-construct bespoke models of parent participation with the intention of creating socially cohesive communities based on personal agency. The chapter considers the implications of implementing the co-constructed model of parent participation based on the findings and discussion. Further research ideas are also presented.

This study revealed that parents and teachers are eager to improve the lives of the children and the community even though challenges exist. Collaborating has the benefit of sharing the challenges and celebrating the achievements. The main research question and sub questions are included as well as the overall aims and objectives of the study.

The main research question is: How can a model for parental participation be developed in ECCE centres that activates social cohesion?

The sub questions provided the opportunity to explore perspectives of parent participation in greater depth:

1. What understandings exist in the setting about parent participation?
2. What experiences exist in the ECCE centre to support parent participation?
3. What policies and procedures support parent participation?
4. What value do participants place on parent participation?

The research questions were discussed in Chapter 6 to clarify how the data and findings answered them. A bespoke co-constructed model of parent participation was created in response to the findings, which evidences that social cohesion is possible when respectful dialogue is the central pedagogical approach of the ECCE centre, valuing the contributions of all members of the community building on personal knowledge and strengths.

Approaching parent participation and the co-construction of parent participation models is presented in this chapter through the recommendations. The qualitative data collection process provided the opportunity to forefront the voice of the parents as well create the opportunity for social cohesion and a community of practice using the AI.

8.2. Summary of Chapters

Teachers are eager for parents to contribute to the life of the ECCE centre, and parents are wanting to be an integral part of the setting. To support this positive approach reflecting on how to do this is vital to the success of meaningful parent participation.

Chapter 1 introduces the research study through the formulation of the main research question and sub-questions. Approaches and understanding of parent participation are explored and defined. Department of Basic Education and Department of Social Development policies are explored to consider how parents are viewed and including in the educational life of their children.

Chapter 2 reviewed existing literature on approaches to parent participation including parent perceptions of participation. This included considering three existing models of parent involvement that are suggested to support parent involvement. In addition ,the chapter explores the differences between parent involvement, parent engagement and parent participation, as these are often considered to be the same thing.

Chapter 3 explored the theoretical and conceptual approach of the study. These approaches are based on supporting a democratic approach to parent participation. The theoretical frameworks supported the development of a conceptual framework to support the creation of a socially cohesive community through meaningful interactions that has the potential to transform and build a strong community of practice.

Chapter 4 addressed the research approach including how the participants were selected. Data collection and data analysis were explained with consideration of the reliability and trustworthiness of the study. Ethical issues and limitations of the study were considered.

Chapter 5 presented the findings regarding experiences and understandings of parent participation by the teachers and parents in the setting. The theoretical and conceptual framework underpinned the analysis of the findings. The themes and sub-themes of the chapter provide the foundation for the co-construction of a parent model within the setting.

Chapter 6 provided a discussion of the findings by answering the main research question and sub-questions. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks were interwoven into answering the questions.

Chapter 7 was dedicated to the development of a generic model of parent participation that can be used to formulate bespoke parent participation within settings. Building relationships that are supportive and based in democratic dialogue are the foundation of the co-creation of a socially cohesive community of practice that can transform the community.

Chapter 8 provides an overview of the findings and recommendations are presented. The significance of a democratic and participatory approach is emphasised in this study to support a model for parent participation. Limitations and opportunities for further research are stated.

8.3.   Summary of Main Findings

In Chapters 5 and 6 the main findings and themes generated were used to answer the main research question. Three key themes emerged from the findings which focus on understandings and experiences of parent participation and how this informs the co-construction of a parent model that is relevant to the setting. The voices of all the stakeholders were central to the analysis and creation of the themes. Being sensitive to the social and cultural approaches within the community around the setting supports both the families and the teachers as they work towards a common goal that best supports the children within the setting.

Participation as connection is based on relationship building that offers support and collaboration to create a socially cohesive community that works together. Creating and maintaining connections supports the notion of ubuntu as the social and cultural capital of the community is valued. Connections also provide the space for the link between the setting and the home to be strengthened (Uitto et.al., 2021). This creates consistency for the children as parents and teachers engage in conversations that evidence valuing experiences and knowledge whilst allowing personal approaches to be aligned. Collaborating allows for the community to support each other as required offering the opportunity to interact and engage. Being connected supports a sense of belonging and community as non-judgemental and equitable relationship building occurs.

Participation as empowerment occurs when personal beliefs and perceptions about how one participates is explored. Being aware of the impact of historical approaches to parent participation assists in implementing changes that align with a humanising approach. Recognising perceptions of who has authority and power within the setting is a valuable discussion as it is based on the experiences and beliefs of those within the setting and the community. The beliefs held by parents and teachers has the capacity to impact directly how parents participate practically and how teachers promote active participation (Smith et.al., 2022). Being intentional and learning from and with each other validates individuals within the community by displaying a sense of trust and value in their contributions, as well as offering support when and where it is necessary.

Reflecting on parent participation is vital to transform the community and avoid maintaining the status quo. Parents and teachers take time to consider what is working well and where changes need to occur. The opportunity to reflect on historical assumptions and personal experiences of parent participation offers a space to engage in dialogue to consider how these assumptions influence what takes place in the setting and how this may impact the wider community. Providing the chance for personal reflections of experiences within the setting offers the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships through open dialogue, whilst providing opportunities to strengthen the community. Moreover, reflecting on participation can support the challenges parents and teachers may face within the wider community. Reflecting

on parent participation allows all stakeholders to work together and learn from each other's experiences to transform the ECCE community into an inclusive and democratic space that empowers all stakeholders (Shaik, 2024:4).

The findings provided evidence of the desire of parents to participate meaningfully in the ECCE setting with the teachers also displaying an appreciation of the value of parent participation (Charamba & Aloka, 2024). Co-constructing a bespoke model of parent participation aligns with democratic approaches that offers opportunities for the community of the setting to agree on how to meet their specific needs. Parents and teachers collaborate as a committed community, both practically and in policy and protocol development. The model is co-constructed by valuing the parents as an asset to the setting, regardless of personal circumstances. Underpinning the parent model is the need for all stakeholders to reflect on their personal pedagogical approach and find common ground working with strengths and challenges which creates the foundation of the parent participation model. The experiences the parents and teachers have in co-creating a parent participation model will have an impact on the immediate setting. The intention of the democratic and participatory approach that underpins this is that it transfers to new educational settings parents and teachers move to, thereby transforming the wider community.

8.3.1. Iterative Processes for Transformation

Approaches to parent participation is the opportunity to transform and create a democratic approach that creates societal change within South Africa (Martin, 2021:84). The ability to transform a community occurs when those in perceived positions of power are discerning and include the voice of all, whilst maintaining the cultural identity, values and practices of the community (Freire, 2017:147). Employing a participatory approach towards families and parents has the potential to transform the ECCE centre and the community into one where all are valued for their contribution, knowledge and experience. It is an inclusive approach and provides a base for those in the ECCE centre to invite the wider community into a community of practice. Participation does not necessarily align with transformation as it is possible that communities repeat or maintain established norms (Fuller, 2007:22). Dewey (1916) spoke of schools as the sites of social transformation and democracy. Schools have the opportunity to be democratic by engaging families and children in democratic and participatory practices (Shaik, 2024:7). Personal agency takes place through engagement with people, which in turn provides the opportunity for transformation (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Transforming a community is the opportunity to move from an undemocratic Apartheid approach upholding individual rights (Taylor, 2023:148). Transformation takes time and does not take place quickly as individuals transition over time culturally, in thought and practice by changing their pedagogical approach (Cameron & Moss, 2020:235). This assists with supporting those in the community to consider what aspects they need to develop within themselves to be included and to learn to value and include others.

8.3.2. Implications for Policy

Policy documents should include guidance on parent participation provides a base from which ECCE centres and schools can confidently empower the families and community of the school and reflect on their current practices (Pope et.al., 2024). In Chapter 1 an exploration of all policy documents and government websites of the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Social Development presented evidence that there is limited focus on the role of parents in ECCE centres or schools. There is brief mention of how parents can fundraise and volunteer. Charamba and Aloka (2024:108) note that policy documents like the South African Schools Act (South Africa, 2011) give parents the power to collaborate with teachers to support their children academically to improve academic outcomes. This limited approach to parent participation needs to be challenged. In general, a democratic approach, in line with government policy, needs to include parent participation in policy documents, where parents are valued for their contributions as part of the community in building an equitable and democratic society.

The original policy documents created by the setting lacked parent participation when they were created. Including parents in the creation and maintenance of the setting's policy documents would empower parents and align with a democratic approach to parent participation (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Open communication regarding the policy documents supports parent engagement with the documents, where reviewing and reflecting on the ideas presented as the community considers what needs to be evidenced as parent participation.

8.4. Recommendations and Contributions of the Study

The intention of this study was to develop a model of parent participation that is used by educational settings to co-construct bespoke parent participation that is relevant and appropriate to their needs.

The knowledge gained during the research and analysis is situated in the stories and lived experiences of the participants. Parents, regardless of their experiences, want to be active contributors and participate meaningfully in the life of the ECCE centre. Teacher's value collaborating with parents, asking for support when they need it. There is a clear sense that the ECCE centre is at the heart of this small community in Lavender Hill where everyone in the community is empowered to contribute to the success of the setting, developing a community of practice based on the principles of democracy and ubuntu.

It is important to be aware of, and not overlook, the challenges faced by low SES communities. Challenges are an opportunity for the community to work together and transform the ECCE centre and the wider community by sharing knowledge and experiences to improve and change approaches to parent participation. This includes empowering all stakeholders within the community through a humanising pedagogy.

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin this study support parent participation as a democratic and empowering process through shared identity that encourages active participation and inclusion of the whole community. This occurs when open dialogue and communication is encouraged to share knowledge and practice to create interconnectedness to build a socially cohesive community.

8.4.1. Recommendation One

To better inform practice it is recommended that reflecting on personal understandings and experiences of participation can inform practice. Creating a participatory and supportive community relies on being aware of past and current personal experiences one has had. Experiences shape and influence how parents participate and how teachers support parent participation. Insight into understandings of participation provide the opportunity to consider the power dynamics in the setting to create equity and promote personal agency. This then supports the transformation of the community as the status quo is challenged and changes occur. Shared understanding creates a sense of community and belonging providing the space to support each other and develop community and induvial skills.

8.4.2. Recommendation Two

The practical implementation of parent participation should be considered by both parents and teachers. Providing opportunities for meaningful participation may have to be initiated by the ECCE setting, as parents may feel apprehensive about their role in the community. Teachers create the initial points of contact, such as home visits and encouraging parents into the setting to contribute by using the skills and knowledge to support the setting. The intention is to develop a relationship with each family by being inclusive and encouraging open dialogue to learn from and with each other without judgement. Learning to participate takes time as parents and teachers get to know each other and build their community. Understanding the needs and challenges faced by those in the ECCE setting is the chance to offer practical support by working together. Open conversations offer the opportunity to balance the power within the setting as all stakeholders feel valued for their contributions. The setting positions itself as the lighthouse within the community by offering possibilities for parents to participate meaningfully within the setting, valuing individual contributions.

8.4.3. Recommendation Three

As discussed in Chapter 6, policy documents represent the intention of how parent participation occurs. DBE policy documents provide limited information on the role of parents within educational settings. Parent participation is attached to supporting children being academically successful and offering financial support to the education setting, with the intention of building a better future for the individual. A review of existing DBE policy documents would benefit from including a democratic and transformative approach to parent participation by promoting and valuing personal agency to support educational settings. Likewise, the ECCE setting policy documents need to be reviewed in collaboration with parents to include

and value their voice, knowledge and experiences. The intention of parent participation on reviewing existing policy documents supports flattening hierarchies by creating equity and valuing all inputs. This also shifts the idea of parents being invited guests in the setting to being active participants at a policy level where the roles and responsibilities of all in the setting are co-created through discussion.

8.4.4.   Recommendation Four

If parent participation is valued collaboration will occur within the setting. Shifting the power within the educational settings include not stipulating how and when parents can participate. Parents in low SES communities may believe they have little to contribute, as well as not being confident they know how they can contribute. Teachers need to initiate parent participation through relationship building which values parent contributions, without judging the quality of the contribution.

8.4.5.   Recommendation Five

Personal pedagogical approaches and beliefs need to be reflected on to create open dialogue and equity within the setting. The foundation of the model for parent participation acknowledges the initial input teachers have in building relationships. To do this, teachers and parents engage in dialogue sharing experiences to develop a socially cohesive approach towards parent participation. As discussed in Chapter 7, the natural movement of parents and teachers into and out of the setting is the opportunity to share experiences of participation within the setting, which supports ongoing dialogue and shared learning. Meaningful connections with all stakeholders in the ECCE setting supports a democratically pedagogical approach that has the potential to influence the wider community.

8.4.6.   Recommendation Six

This study focussed on creating a model of parent participation that offers the opportunity for ECCE centres to co-construct parent participation that is relevant to their specific needs. Existing models of parent involvement rely on the school as the initiator and instigator of parent involvement. The model presented in this study is a strengths-based approach to parent participation based on collaboration and community building. This study acknowledges the initial role teachers have in creating opportunities for parent participation; however, the intention is to create meaningful opportunities for parent participation through relationship building that empowers all the stakeholders. No one group within the community is considered more empowered than another. Co-creating a bespoke model of parent participation is possible through collaborating as a community to transform existing approaches towards democratic inclusion that support concepts of ubuntu in action.

Pedagogical foundations will take time to become established as meaningful participation is a concept that cannot be enforced or stipulated. It will occur with the promotion of collaboration and trustful relationship building. The intention of this is that social cohesion occurs as everyone within the setting knows their contributions are valued. Transformation of the

community will occur as parents and teachers transfer their knowledge and experience of parent participation into new communities they join. The community around the setting will also benefit from the participatory approach as it becomes the preferred pedagogical approach over time.

8.5.   Limitations of the Study

Due to the nature of the data collection that used an AI, this study was limited to one ECCE setting. The findings are based on data gathered from one group of parents and teachers in the setting. These experiences of participation shared in the semi-structured interviews may not reflect the experiences of all the parents in the setting, as only seven parents participated. The focus of the study is limited to one setting in a low SES community in the Western Cape and only reflects their experiences.

These limitations had no adverse effects on achieving the aims and objectives of the study as the co-construction of parent participation is related to the specific setting, whilst allowing the opportunity to use the data to develop a generic model of parent participation that can be employed by other settings and schools. The results of the study support the notion that parent participation is achievable and can be used to develop socially cohesive communities that have the potential to transform society.

8.6.   Recommendations for Further Research

As the suggested model evolved as a co-creation by participants in an ECCE setting in Lavender Hill, an opportunity to research the process of co-creation of site-specific models would provide data to compare and contrast parent participation models in a variety of settings.

1. A longitudinal study could explore the impact the co-created model has had on the setting and how dialogue and community has been maintained, especially as there is always attrition within settings. Researching the long-term impacts of a democratic and community approach to participation and how this experience is perpetuated by the parents and teachers as they move into other education settings.

2. The challenges and benefits of implementing and maintaining a model of parent participation can be researched. This would include researching how it changes the culture of parent participation within the community and the impact it has on the life of the school/setting.

3. Research into the impact democratic parent participation has on the community the setting is based in would be the opportunity to consider how social cohesion can transform society and empower the community. This would include researching whether the new participatory approach has been implemented into new educational settings through parent and teacher movement into new spaces.

8.7.   Reflections of Research Journey

The research journey has been an opportunity to learn and grow as an academic. I have valued learning from the Lavender Hill community. Their eagerness to be part of dialogue, sharing their experiences and collaborating for the benefit of the setting and the wider community was inspirational. This enthusiasm supported the intention of encouraging democracy, listening to others and being open to learn and contribute in a respectful way.

Towards the end of the research process, I was exposed to a posthumanism (Williams, 2013) as an approach. I immediately felt an affinity to this qualitative research method as it naturally aligned with the democratic approach required to develop a potential model for parent participation. In addition, elements of posthumanism align with the theoretical framework of the study by encouraging us to construct our social world with and alongside others (Braidotti, 2020). Creating the opportunity to develop personal and social agency within the setting meant stepping back as a researcher to allow the voices of the individuals to come to the fore. This approach challenges the status quo and how we think about parent participation.

A social constructionist approach also accepts the knowledge and experience of the participants in the creation of their preferred way of functioning. Foregrounding the voices of the participants aligns with a posthuman approach that values the concept of everyone in Lavender Hill being interconnected, creating their own lived experiences that they can develop (Moss, 2019:141). Personal agency accepts the potential for possibility where all participants in the community are response-able (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017:66). Being response-able supports the notion of being agents of our own learning and experiences and that we can share this with others to respond to the environments we are part of (Albin-Clark et al., 2021). Approaching the research from the posthuman world view aligns with Freire's approach to challenging power dynamics by recognising the power and possibility within the individual which can then shift society out of oppression towards a sense of hopefulness. Moss (2019:89) describes power as being part of every relationship and this knowledge can be used in a positive way if we reflect on the dominant discourse to establish what views and truths have been imposed on the community. Freire (2017) and Foucault (1988) consider societal control with the importance of knowing that society reflects the dominant thought of those who have the power, and this shapes the society (Moss, 2019:121). In the community of Lavender Hill, oppression and lack of self- worth may be the result of this dominant worldview.

Furthermore, I have become interested in the prospect of using creative methods (Clarke & Moss, 2001) as part of the data collection process, as another way of generating data. I took photographs during the AI and came to the realisation that I could have used these to generate discussions with the participants about the images, as well as expanded on the use of imagery. This would have supported language barriers and provided opportunity for more detailed exploration of experiences and understanding.

Developing a model of parent participation based on dialogue and democracy is not without its challenges. Schools and settings may view parent participation as an element they are not eager to engage in as they fear the parent voice. Equally parents may view participation as the opportunity to make demands. The families and teachers in the setting have their own beliefs and perceptions about how they can participate. These beliefs are created through their own experiences of the value of parent participation as well as their perceptions of how they participate.

The challenge of creating parent participation requires all the stakeholders to revisit their understandings of how they can contribute meaningfully to the community and challenge the status quo. It is often easier to pay lip service to the idea that parents participate, and the intention is to embed it within the ECCE setting and make it a norm of function. Therefore, when families first join the ECCE centre they are brought in and made to feel equal within the setting from day one. Teachers may fear a loss of authority and reflecting on beliefs and expectations will support making change.

In the setting of this research project the teachers have already undergone intense reflection as they have all studied Montessori pedagogy, and this has provided the opportunity to have a different approach to both the families and children. When employing this model in traditional ECCE centres it is important to allow the centre to remain authentic to their pedagogical practice whilst embracing a democratic approach to working with the families. The model is co-created in a way that allows for all stakeholders in a setting to start where they feel most comfortable and to move between each of the aspects of the model as a group. This is a slow process and cannot be forced or stipulated. Central to this is providing the opportunity for dialogue and to sit with being uncomfortable as they learn to work as a cohesive community.

Cameron and Moss (2020:226) have a view of the ECCE centre as being a public space and resource where children, families and the wider community connect and are socially cohesive working together. This includes a collective responsibility and democratic conversations as part of decision-making. The intention of this ECCE centre is to be the core of the immediate community where parents, children and teachers are working together and is based on building cohesive and supportive relationships. Hopefully this shift to parents participating as a community of practice will transform not only the individual but the immediate and wider community around the centre.

8.8.   Conclusion

At the start of this research project, I was drawn to perceptions that teachers and parents have regarding parent participation and how these ideas influence how ECCE settings encourage and support parent participation. The expectation that parents and setting should collaborate exists in policy as it benefits children and their academic progress. Generally educational

settings gatekeep parent participation by establishing how and when parents are invited into the educational life of their children.

Shifting parent involvement to parent participation is based in acknowledging personal approaches and influences and reflecting on how to build a community of practice that is democratic and inclusive. Taking the time to challenge existing approaches includes reviewing policy and practice through a humanising pedagogy. If it takes a village to raise a child, it is important for open dialogue that values all experiences to build a socially cohesive approach within the community.

It is my hope that this research may influence approaches all ECCE settings and schools take towards parent participation that reflects a truly democratic and inclusive South Africa, and that the children at the core of the setting experience and internalise community collaboration based in participatory practices.

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Appendix A: CPUT Ethical Clearance Letter

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Faculty of
Education
Highbury Road
Mowbray

7700

Tel: +27 21 959 6583

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

On the **7 June 2022** the Chairperson of the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology granted ethics approval **(EFEC 2-06/2022)** to **A. Connely** for a **DEd degree**.

Title:	**Developing a model of parent participation in an Early Childhood Care and Education centre in Lavender Hill, Western Cape.**

Comments:

The EFEC unconditionally grants ethical clearance for this study. This clearance is valid until **31ˢᵗ December 2025**. Permission is granted to conduct research within the **Faculty of Education only**. Research activities are restricted to those details in the research project as outlined by the Ethics application. Any changes wrought to the described study must be reported to the Ethics committee immediately.

Date: 7 June 2022

Prof. Zayd Waghid

Chair of the Education Faculty Ethics committee (EFEC)

Faculty of Education

Appendix B: Letter to Principal

16 Markham Road,

Claremont,

7708.

25ᵗʰ August 2022

Dear Mikayle,

Re: Research collection processes.

Thank you for meeting with me to discuss potential dates for data collection.

As mentioned, there are 3 areas of data collection. The first is interviewing 10-12 parents individually, in the school. I have provided a schedule, please let me know if I need to adjust this.

I have also included a schedule for interviewing the teachers in the school, again please let me know if I need to make changes.

The agreed dates for the interviews are 12-16 September for the parents, and 4 – 5 September for the teachers.

I will also use this time to explain the journals that everyone interviewed will keep over this time.

I have also confirmed the day-long workshop can be held on the 1st October. The intention with this is to include ALL the parents. Snacks and lunch will be provided as well. I will confirm the venue as soon as possible.

Once again, thank you for being available to explore parent participation in your school. I look forward to sharing all the information I collect with the school.

Kind regards,
Ally Connelly

Appendix C: Consent to Participate in Research

Addendum 1: Letter of informed consent

Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (CPUT) for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

Ethics informed consent form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Category of Participants (tick as appropriate):

Principals	_	Teachers	_	Parents	_	Lecturers		Students	
Other (specify)									

You are kindly invited to participate in a research study being conducted by **AILSA CONNELLY** from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The findings of this study will contribute towards (tick as appropriate):

An undergraduate project		A conference paper	

An Honours project		A published journal article	
A Masters/doctoral thesis		A published report	

Selection criteria

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because (give reason why candidate has been chosen):

Principal:

As the appointed school leader you have experience and knowledge of working with both teachers and parents in the ECCE setting. Your Level 5 Diploma in Early Childhood care would have provided theoretical knowledge on the expectations for interacting and developing relationships with parents. As the principal the ECCE centre looks to you to provide the space for regular, relevant communication with teachers and staff to ensure effective management of the ECCE centre.

Teachers:

As the primary carers of the children during the school day, it is a natural part of your work to share information and experiences with the parents. The benefits of developing relationships with the parents and having good lines of communication ensure the smooth running of your classroom, as you are better able to meet the needs of the children on a daily basis. As qualified teachers at level 4/5 you have personal experience of needing to communicate with the parents in order to ensure you are building a caring community within your classroom.

Parents:

As the primary caregiver you have valuable insight into your child and how they feel about school. Sharing information about home and having a clear understanding of what happens during the school day relies on open, honest communication. As parents you are the vital link between the ECCE setting and the home. Your role in the success of the ECCE centre is vital in building a community.

The information below gives details about the study to help you decide whether you would want to participate.

Title of the research:

Developing a model of parent participation in an Early Childhood Care and Education centre in Lavender Hill, Western Cape.

A brief explanation of what the research involves:

In South African ECCE centres, there is limited research that reveals the ways in which parents can and do participate. Studies show that parents, teachers and children are active and equal partners in the construction of the curriculum and form part of the context as citizens with democratic rights who have a voice in its realisation (Pascal & Bertram, 2009;2012).

Acknowledging the importance of parental participation in the academic and social wellbeing of young children, this study explores the nature of parental participation in ECCE settings in Lavender Hill, Cape Town. This small scale study will be conducted using semi-structured interviews and journaling to allow participants to share their experiences and understanding of parent participation in their specific ECCE setting. The policy documents regarding parent participation, within the ECCE setting, will also be analysed. An Appreciative Inquiry, involving the parents and teachers in the ECCE centre will be used to co-construct a context specific model for parent participation.

Benefits of research

This study will develop a model of parent participation, based on democratic principles where all stake holders have agency, within this ECCE setting. This model will be developed collaboratively with the parents, teachers and principals, of this particular ECCE setting, using an Appreciative Inquiry approach (Magruder Watkins & Mohr 2001). In this process you have the opportunity to have a voice in the creation of a parent model that is relevant to your ECCE.

Incentives

There are no incentives to participate in the research. Your contribution is valuable to building a relevant parent model that you are contributing to.

Procedures (duration)

In this research process there are 4 forms of data collection:

1. Semi-structured interviews

These will take place with the principal, teachers and 12 parents before the Appreciative Inquiry. The aim of this is to determine how each group views and understands parent participation, including their own experiences of it within an ECCE setting.

2. Journaling –pre and post the Appreciative Inquiry

You will each be provided with a guide of potential reflection topics. This will need to be completed weekly, and should not be too time consuming. I will be available to support and guide all the participants in the journal keeping. This is an opportunity for you to discuss your views and observations relating to parent participation, both before and after the Appreciative Inquiry.

3. Document analysis

I will ask the Principal for all ECCE documents that outline the expectations of parent participation and how it occurs within the ECCE setting. These include any information shared with parents before they join the centre, and information available on the ECCE centre website.

4. Appreciative Inquiry

This is a day long process that involves as many stakeholders (parents and teachers) as possible to work on developing a model of parent participation. This day will be a collaborative day that encourages all the participants to share their ideas and experiences as a model of parent participation is created with this knowledge. A day will be chosen that is suitable for as many stakeholders as possible, this will be done through discussion and agreement as a group. Lunch and refreshments will be provided.

Right to withdraw/ voluntary participation

As a participant you have the right to ask for more detailed information from the researcher. Any concerns and questions you have will be addressed timeously. You also have the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Confidentiality and anonymity

I will make sure they have all the information they need with regard to what the research is about. To ensure anonymity the name of the ECCE centre will not be used and no participants involved will be identified. Before we start the Appreciative Inquiry the researcher will clarify the need for confidentiality and trustworthiness amongst the participants.

At no point in the research, or after, will any identifying information be used. There is complete confidentiality in data collection processes. Anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured in each aspect of data collection. All information collected and divulged will not be discussed with anyone else in the ECCE setting.

Any identifying information, like names of participants, classroom names, and ECCE centre names will at no stage be made available to anyone outside of the researcher.

I will make sure you have all the information you need to feel protected and respected during the data collection process. All information and the parent model will be shared with all the stakeholders in this ECCE setting.

Potential risks, discomforts or inconveniences

There are no physical risks to the researcher or the participants, including social, mental and emotional. If there is any discomfort I, as the researcher, will ensure there is an opportunity to discuss these and address any concerns as they arise. The intention of the researcher is to make sure all participants feel acknowledged and understood.

I acknowledge the value of the information being shared, and will ensure that the environment makes everyone feel relaxed and comfortable, in order to share experiences. I will also communicate the importance of not feeling judged by me, or the other participants, as we build relationships that are based on acceptance. I will remain honest and respectful towards participants.

Dissemination of results

The model for parent participation within this ECCE setting will be made available to the centre as all the stakeholders have played a part in developing the site specific model. I will also submit the research as a journal article for publication in the South African Journal of Childhood Education. The findings will also be made available to the Appreciative Inquiry commons forum. The findings will be presented at relevant Early Childhood Education conferences and colloquiums.

Kindly complete the table below before participating in the research.

	Tick the appropriate column	
Statement	Yes	No
1. I understand the purpose of the research.		
2. I understand what the research requires of me.		
3. I volunteer to take part in the research.		
4. I know that I can withdraw at any time.		
5. I understand that there will not be any form of discrimination against me as a result of my participation or non-participation.		
6. Comment:		

Please sign the consent form. You will be given a copy of this form on request.

Signature of participant	Date

Researchers

	Name:	Surname:	Contact details:
1.	Ailsa	Connelly	0849525588
2.			
3.			

Contact person: Ailsa Connelly

Contact number: 0849525588	Email: asconnelly@gmail.com

Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Questions

This is a generic interview and was personalised for the Principal, the teachers and the parents as required.

1. As the principal/practitioner/parent what do you understand parent involvement to be?
2. What is your understanding of parent participation?
3. How does the school encourage parent participation?
4. Are there any policies in the ECCE that encourage parent participation?
5. How are parents involved in the school?
6. What are the benefits of parent participation from your perspective?
7. What are the challenges of parent participation in the ECCE?
8. Do you think there is a difference between parent involvement and parent participation?
9. As a teacher/principal/parent in this ECCE centre how do you see parents participating in the school?
10. As a parent how do you participate in the ECCE?
11. Explain how you believe parents have a voice in the ECCE?

Appendix E: Journal Template

In this reflective journal you will identify times when parent involvement and participation have occurred in the ECCE. The template provides with you a guideline of questions to reflect on how parents participate in the ECCE. The aim of this is to record parent participation whether it is within the classroom or within the school. It is the opportunity to become more aware of parent participation. Aim to have **4-6 reflections**, one a week, or as interactions occur, on parent participation, before the Appreciative Inquiry.

For each item consider in detail aspects of the participation as an opportunity to use it as a learning experience. You will be provided with a note book/journal.

Reflect on the parent participation in the four suggested stages. There is also the opportunity to include aspects you may want to record that are not addressed by these four stages.

1. The event/situation: Record the detail of what the parent participation was about. E.g. a parent meeting. Give an outline of how the meeting occurred.
2. The affect: How did this impact you personally?
3. Your interpretation: What did you learn from this experience?
4. Outcome: What could be done differently to improve or change the experience?
5. Other aspects: Include ideas and experiences that happened.

Appendix F: Appreciative Inquiry Session

Time	Activity	Researcher notes
09h00 – 09h15	Welcome and introduction to the day, include intention of the day	1. The purpose of the day is 2. Intended outcome
09h15 -09h30	Provide an overview of what an Appreciative Inquiry is and what parent participation is	1. Explain parent participation and having a voice within the ECCE and the benefits of this to the ECCE and the wider community. How this is different to parent involvement/engagement. 2. Explain the intention of using an Appreciative Inquiry to develop a positive model that is specific to the ECCE, to encourage parent participation
09h30-10h20	Paired interviews on 'best experience' of parent participation	1. Participants are paired, and take turn interviewing each other on their best experiences of participating. A template of questions will be provided, see below. 2. Explain the process of interviewing, that it is not a discussion but rather look for key moments, things of interest and feel free to ask for more detail and information from the person you are interviewing. 3. Clearly explain the time limit of the interview to 25 minutes each. 4. At the end of the interview write down key points mentioned. These will be shared with others.
10h20-10h30	Debrief of the interview process	What did the participants enjoy, find a challenge etc.?

Time	Activity	Researcher notes
10h30-10h45	TEA BREAK	

10h45 – 11h15	Exploring interviews	In groups of 6 participants will give an overview of the information gathered from the person they interviewed. What were the highlights. What inspired the person? Each person has 5 minutes to share their partners story, and check in with them about what is shared.
11h15-12h00	Exploration of key ideas from interview	1. In the group of 6 write down key ideas and phrases that came out of the interviews relating to positive experiences of participation. This will be written on flip chart paper. 2. Put up flip chart and explain the idea of finding elements of positive participation individual value. Place dots at those, off any chart. 3. Step back and consider the scattergram of these ideas, and what appears most valued.
12h00-13h00	Develop a model for positive participation in a creative way	Each group works on a creative approach to express their understanding of a positive parenting model. This can be in the form of a song/ dance/ drawing/ poem etc. each group will present theirs to the whole group after lunch.
13h00-13h45	LUNCH BREAK	
13h45 – 14h30	Development of possible parent model	Using ideas presented during the morning each group will develop a parent participation model pertinent to the ECCE setting. This will be presented to the whole group.

14h30-15h00	Clarify next steps	1. Create an action plan to develop a single model based on each groups ideas. 2. How will this model be created, who will be involved and what is the time frame for delivery to the whole group.
15h00-15h30	Debrief of the Appreciative Inquiry and closure	1. What part of the day was engaging? 2. What part of the day needs to be built on going forward? 3. What wishes do you have going forward? 4. Commit to time frames for delivery of parent participation model to the whole ECCE. 5. Agreement on time to review the model, within 3 months of implementation.

Template of Questions for participants to ask each other about their best experience of participation.

1. What is your best experience of participating in an activity, school, event?

2. Who was part of this experience?

3. What made their involvement significant?

4. What was happening at that time?

5. What makes this an important and memorable experience?

6. How did you feel in this experience?

7. What did you contribute to this experience?

8. What do you value about being allowed to participate?

9. What contribution do you make to participating in this event?

10. What do you consider the most valuable aspect of this ECCE centre?

11. If you had three wishes to participate more in the ECCE centre, what would they be?

Appendix G: Timeline of data collection

Tool	Semi Structured interviews	Journaling	Appreciative Inquiry workshop	School documents

Participants	4 staff members 7 parents	7 parents	4 staff members 27 Parents	Principal NGO
Time taken	Staff interviews over two days in the afternoon. Parents were interviewed over three afternoons when they were available.	4-6 journal entries to be completed by parents who were part of the semi structured interviews	One Saturday was set aside to host the workshop.	The principal and Ngo gave me hard copies of the school documents and a link to the google drive that has the documents as well
Venue	On the school property in a quiet area without being disturbed	Parents were provided with the journal to complete in their own time over one month before the Appreciative Inquiry.	The school was used and I set up the venue before the parents arrived.	My own home
Further details	Please see Appendix D for interview questions	Please see Appendix E for the journal template	Please see Appendix F for the workshop structure	

Appendix H: Language editing letter

Amanda Lancaster
4 Windsor Road
Plumstead 7800

Email Address: amanda.lancaster@mweb.co.za
Cell No.: 081 267 7900

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To Whom it May Concern

Certificate of Language Editing

This serves to confirm that I have edited and formatted a thesis entitled

Developing a Model of Parent Participation in an Early Childhood Care and Education Centre in Lavender Hill, Western Cape

by Ailsa Sally Connelly as a requirement for completing her Doctor of Technology: Education in the Faculty of Education at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Amanda Lancaster
M.Tech Public Relations Management (2020)