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Conceptualising quality early childhood education: Learning from young children in Brazil and South Africa through creative and play-based methods

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Abstract

Early childhood has increasingly been acknowledged as a vital time for all children. Inclusive and quality education is part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with the further specification that all children have access to quality pre-primary education. As early childhood education (ECE) has expanded worldwide, so have concerns about the quality of ECE provision, including whether its pedagogy is culturally meaningful and contextually appropriate. While these issues are much debated in themselves, often missing is a key stakeholder group for such discussions: young children. Young children have critical insights and perspectives of key importance for ensuring quality ECE. This article addresses how quality ECE can be conceptualised, through reflections on creative and play-based methods with young children, used in a cross-national project titled Safe Inclusive Participative Pedagogy. The article draws on community case studies undertaken by two of the country teams in Brazil and South Africa. In contexts where children's participation is not necessarily familiar in ECE settings nor understood by key stakeholders, the fieldwork shows that children can express their

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views and experiences through using creative and play-based methods. We argue that these methods can become part of a critical pedagogy through ECE settings, where ECE practitioners, children and other key stakeholders engage in ongoing, challenging and transformative dialogue. In turn, critical pedagogy has the potential to strengthen local practices, challenge top-down approach, and foster quality safe, inclusive, participative early years education.

KEYWORDS

creative pedagogies, play-based methods, quality early childhood education, young children

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses how quality early childhood education is conceptualised through reflecting on creative and play-based methods with young children. The article draws on community case studies in South Africa and Brazil to explore these methods and their role in critical pedagogy for quality education.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The article provides insights on the role of creative and play-based methods as a part of critical pedagogy for quality ECE across contexts. It highlights the importance of children's meaningful participation and the potential of critical pedagogy to strengthen local practices, challenge top-down approaches and foster quality safe, inclusive, participative ECE.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is increasingly valued in countries around the world and by international education bodies. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which set the world's development agenda until 2030, include SDG 4 on education and learning (countries must 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all') and more specifically SDG 4.2 calls for all children to have access to quality ECE. The accumulated research has been convincing: high-quality ECE is recognised as a protective factor for children experiencing the effects of poverty and other inequalities and can improve their long-term opportunities and life experiences (Garcia et al., 2017; OED 2018). With the rapid expansion of provision worldwide, significant implementation issues are now recognised, requiring attention to: the quality, and not just the quantity, of learning experiences and professional support; culturally meaningful and appropriate pedagogy; and the affordability, inclusivity and sustainability of ECE provision (OECD, 2017; Woodhead, 2016).

Furthermore, our definitions and understandings of quality must recognise and include young children's own conceptualisations of quality in their early years settings. In Brazil, the 1983

publication *The Passion to Know the World*, by Madalena Freire (daughter of Paulo Freire), argues that registering the views of children and their teachers is necessary. This and other studies about child pedagogy (Rocha, 2000) and about quality in ECE (Campos, 2010; Cruz & Schramm, 2019) affirm that the construction of quality pedagogical practices for early childhood must respect the rights of children and their meaningful participation. However, numerous studies with children show that the daily practices of listening to children are still not guaranteed. This article draws on qualitative case studies from communities involved in the Safe Inclusive Participative Pedagogy (SIPP) project. The case studies explored the assets, threats and opportunities for early childhood learning and sought to identify how safe, inclusive and participative pedagogy can become embedded and sustainable in these communities. It is a partnership project, with research teams from Brazil, Eswatini, Palestine, South Africa and Scotland.¹ The community case study methods include creative and play-based research activities, ethnographic observation, local mapping, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with children (predominantly 4- to 6-year-olds) and their family members, service providers and community stakeholders. Ethical considerations are of critical importance for the project, with formal ethics approval obtained in each partner university at the country level and overall by the Moray House School of Education and Sport Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh. We dedicate ongoing attention to a range of procedural and relational ethical issues, such as informed and ongoing consent, confidentiality and safeguarding, power dynamics and inclusive approaches.

The project from its inception was framed to investigate the interlocking dimensions of safety, inclusion and participation for ECE pedagogy, as dimensions of quality, based on international and country specific literature and building on the partners' own previous research programmes (see the project website for links to partners' previous research). What the project aimed to do was to investigate how the terms were used and conceptualised in policy and practice and how the case studies worked with community members to articulate what *they* consider safe, inclusive and participative pedagogy to be and how it can be realised through and with their communities. Further, the SIPP project is committed to including young children's perspectives and contributions—as well as their family members and carers, teachers, service providers and other community leaders—because children both are key stakeholders in ECE *and* have expertise and viewpoints that are critical to exploring safety, inclusion and participation for children for quality ECE. The SIPP project has used a range of creative and play-based methods with young children, organised around a common set of fieldwork questions that have been adapted to be appropriate and engaging contextually.

This article reflects how the creative and play-based methods with children address the project's core questions about safe, inclusive and participative pedagogy: in other words, how these methods were useful or not for eliciting children's views on these aspects of quality ECE pedagogy. We concentrate on the findings and experiences of two of the research teams, Centro Internacional de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre a Infância (CIESPI) in Brazil and the Children's Institute, South Africa, and the communities with whom they partnered (Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Vrygrond, Cape Town, South Africa). The case studies, we suggest, are highly illuminating for this article's focus. Both Brazil and South Africa have longstanding policy commitment to engaging with children and have extensive policy on ECE and related issues. While many strengths exist, in countries of considerable inequality, implementation of ECE has been challenging in communities with less resources and widespread poverty. Furthermore, challenges have been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated already existing issues of safety/violence, poverty and limited access to ECE (see McNair, Addison, et al., 2022b).

Below, we first review how ECE quality is constructed in the literature, with a particular critique of its claims to universality and its suitability for local contexts and lived experiences globally. We consider the potential contribution of critical pedagogy as a way to achieve quality, define it collaboratively and argue for research methods that are creative and play-based. In the next section, we consider the community case study contexts and the methods used

with young children. We finish by exploring comparative learnings across the two case studies on the role of creative and play-based methods in exploring young children's perspectives on safety, inclusion and participation in the discussion and conclusion sections.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Quality in early childhood education

Scholars across disciplines have noted the critical importance of 'quality' in ECE (Rao et al., 2014; Sabol et al., 2013). Quality ECE is said to enhance child outcomes and later school success and social adjustment, whereas low quality can have damaging effects on children (OECD, 2018). As stated above, attempting to define quality in ECE can be complex and nuanced. However, there is considerable agreement over two components, structure and process, as outlined by Ishimine and Tayler (2014):

structural quality refers to components such as service facilities/resources, staff-to-child ratios and staff qualifications ... process quality focuses on the nature of interactions between the children and [pedagogues], among children, and among adults ... the nature of leadership and pedagogy. (272)

While structure and process may apply across contexts, quality must be culturally and contextually structured and understood (Tobin, 2005), particularly in spaces of conflict and inequality. There is a sharp critique in the literature that some internationally propelled ECE developments have not sufficiently taken into account cultural and contextual understandings (Ebrahim, 2012; Nsamenang, 2010; Serpell, 2019; Serpell & Nsamenang, 2014). In certain contexts, normative definitions from the Global Northⁱⁱ have been imposed on other settings, leading to community disquiet and ECE that is not applicable or sustainable.

Recognising the important of community driven approaches and local concerns, we take this one step further to combine cultural and contextual understandings with a particular focus on young children's ways of knowing, feeling and understanding. As such, we explore ECE quality in relation to listening to children in their particular (and in themselves diverse) communities. The nature of interactions between children and teachers, among children and among adults can only be considered quality if there is careful listening taking place between participants, i.e. the teachers must pay the children (and others) serious attention, regarding what is being said, and not said. According to Bassel (2017), 'listening with humility and ethical care can provide a resource to understand the contemporary world while pointing to the possibility of a different kind of future' (p. 4). Thus, careful listening is part of not only learning, but also collectively identifying alternatives (presumably more emancipatory and positive ones). It has ethical components as well as the practical ones of stakeholder involvement in improving structures and processes.

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy in ECE is one approach that can disrupt normative international constructs of quality education and foster participatory communication spaces where questioning is welcome. According to Trede and Titchen (2012), critical pedagogical practice:

is concerned with creating transformational cultures of effectiveness and enabling individuals, teams, organisations and communities to deliver, and co-construct new knowledge and practices. (p. 1)

Aligning with Freire's critical pedagogy, ECE requires conscientisation, humanisation, dialogue and critical praxis for learning and unlearning and, ultimately, transformation (Freire, 1970). Teachers and facilitators of transformative practices need both skills in guiding emancipatory, participatory processes and a supportive space for the courage and time to engage in self-reflexivity (Trede & Titchen, 2012). Quality ECE can thus thrive 'in communicative spaces where all participants listen non-judgmentally with respect and feel valued and enabled to speak openly without fear' (Trede & Titchen, 2012: 1). However, such spaces are not always encouraged for ECE settings and in many countries questioning may not necessarily be encouraged from young children.

At least two different reasons can be identified, from the SIPP policy analysis and mapping, for the lack of such spaces and investment in critical pedagogy. In some countries, such as South Africa, national governments are potentially powerful in regulating ECE policy (South Africa Economic Growth & Development, 2021). The full panoply of top-down educational policies can be treated as sacrosanct, accepted and unchallenged by those whose lives are deeply affected by them (e.g. the children and educational professionals). In other countries, such as Brazil, the complexities of governance mean that national policies have less impact on local communities, where there is limited attention to ECE and thus limited investment in professional emancipatory practices. Both these reasons can constrain ECE practitioners in recognising and developing their own critical pedagogy.

However, as a 'bottom up' approach, critical pedagogy may be able flourish in either context. It potentially provides an alternative to top-down approaches to ensuring quality in ECE. It can arise from the initiatives of children and their families, professional and other stakeholders to embrace critical pedagogy to develop their own local ECE. Thus, critical pedagogy potentially provides a 'bottom up' approach to ensuring quality ECE, with opportunities for adults and children together to challenge normative impositions and discuss and determine quality, building up from their local contexts and understandings.

Methods to listen to children's perspectives

Creative and play-based methods can provide inclusive ways for critical pedagogy to engage with children's perspectives, with arguments that such methods tap into ways that children communicate. These methods can have additional advantages for young children, who may not (yet) communicate through words. Below we consider the respective components of creative and play-based methods, for working with young children.

Creative methods have been extensively used in research with children (e.g. Harris et al., 2015; Clark, 2011a; Clark, 2011b) and seek to develop positive environments to listen to them meaningfully (Leighton, 2020). Creative research methods often include arts-based methods and participatory approaches and can support meaningful participation and dialogue (Leavy, 2018). These methods have been used with young children to explore different topics, such as protection, state care (Winter, 2012), learning, inclusion (Cologon et al., 2019), social issues (Wright, 2021) and perspectives about 'voice' (Blaisdell et al., 2019). While these methods are ever-increasing in their use (Brady & Graham, 2018; Tisdall, 2015), Coyne et al. (2021) note that 'there are less accounts of *how* researchers obtain young children's meanings through creative methods' (p. 814). There are methodological challenges to using such methods, which we reflect upon below.

In contrast to the popularity of 'creative' methods in the childhood studies literature, the term play-based/playful research and its explicit use has only emerged in a few studies (e.g. Atkinson, 2006; Campo et al., 2019; Koller & San Juan, 2015; Wright, 2021). Diverse accounts of what 'counts' as play can be found across this literature, with different assumption being made on what play 'is' or entails (Wright, 2021). Research on play has often

privileged 'Western culture' and has neglected to recognise play as culturally specific (Marfo & Biersteker, 2011; Oponng & Strader, 2022). Normative assumptions and universal claims to play often fail to recognise play's cultural influences for children across societies (Haight et al., 1999; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001) and ignore the 'contrasting realities of childhood experiences' (Roopnarine, 2012: 20). As such, when exploring play-based methods and creative methods it is critical to reflect on diverse forms of play and creativity across contexts and lived experiences, as will be presented in this article. While few studies explicitly on play-based methods exist, researchers such as Atkinson (2006) suggest that playful research techniques can create rich information in unexpected ways and support relationships between children and adults.

Both the terms 'creative' and 'play-based' are contested and contestable: what can be presumed to be creative or playful by the adult researcher, for example, may not be experienced as such by the child participant (Wright, 2021). Further, the critical discussion of play brings out its diversity and contextual aspects, which equally apply to creativity and creative methods. The methods we used in the community case studies sought to be both creative and play-based, with the intention to support meaningful participation, relational engagement and routes to empowerment, 'rather than a tool for positive "data extraction"' (Blaisdell et al., 2019: 17). While we used and value these methods in our research, we also do not romanticise the methods and remain cognisant and critically reflective of the potential challenge and pitfalls of their use with children (Tisdall, 2015). As such, this article will highlight strengths, challenges and learning in the creative and play-based research methods used, engaging in reflexivity throughout the process on their potential to support critical pedagogy, on such critical issues as quality ECE, with young children.

LEARNING FROM METHODS IN TWO COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES

Rocinha, Brazil

The Brazilian community site is Rocinha, a steep mountain-side low-income community in the southern zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Population estimates vary but reach as high as 150,000 inhabitants. The community measures less than one square mile. Most homes are made of brick or concrete blocks with steel structure support. While floor plans are very small, some at 2 m square, the buildings are multi-story with many having three or four floors. Most homes are only accessible by concrete steps or alleys.

Rocinha has a very active small business life with over 200 small businesses including bakeries, bars, convenience stores, hairdressers, beauty salons, pharmacies and bank branches. It has three public health clinics. It is surrounded by middle income neighbourhoods, a source of jobs for women as domestic workers. It is closer to downtown than most low-income communities in Rio and hence has access to public sector and service jobs. The dense profile combined with homes with small floor plans is fertile ground for respiratory diseases. Rocinha has very high rates of leprosy and tuberculosis.

A critical problem in Rocinha is the violence caused by drug traffickers and by police responses. The community is controlled by one major gang. Violence is endemic. Shootouts are frequent between traffickers and the police. Many of the traffickers are young men and they are very heavily armed. Young children are sometimes prevented from going to school when the shooting starts. A major challenge for young children is the almost complete absence of safe places for them to play. Open spaces are rare and those that exist are often dominated by drug traffickers.

Rocinha has about 30 formal early childhood learning centres, public, private and non-profit. They are a critical resource for parents but struggle with poor infrastructure, the difficulty of recruiting and retaining trained teachers, slow payments from the municipality and overcrowding. However, several of the non-profit centres have a long history and well-developed programmes. The community also has a modern, well-used public library.

There are several very active resident advocacy groups in the community that tackle a number of community issues. CIESPI's rights-based approach to research is consonant with the literature review above, especially the need to develop positive environments to gather children's ideas (Harris et al., 2015), the use of play to build rapport (Koller & San Juan, 2015) and the notion that playful research techniques can create rich information in unexpected ways (Atkinson, 2006).

Our experiences connect with and support those developed by the Brazilian theorist Freire. One of Freire's key concerns was for an education that empowers illiterate adults to speak for themselves and to be able to name their own world. He also applied this to children's vision of their worlds and adults' connections with their childhoods. In a letter to his 9-year-old niece, Nathercia Lacerda, Freire expressed the importance of childhood in his own ways of engaging in the world: 'At times I feel like a child too: I want to run; to play; to sing; to tell all the world that I like living' (Freire, 2016: 55). The Brazilian poet Manoel Barros wrote, 'the delirium of the words was at the beginning, where the child says: I listen to the colour of the birds' (Barros, 1994: 23). This dialogical approach keyed us into the importance of unspoken dialogue.

There were several critical advantages CIESPI had in building trust with the creches, so that the researchers were welcomed warmly by teachers who in turn set up warm relationships between the researchers and the young children. CIESPI staff have worked for years in the community doing research and assisting play and toy libraries. As part of this project, we trained six young people (junior associates) from the community to work with young children, and these young people then later volunteered at a number of early childhood centres. Two of CIESPI's project researchers live in the community, which was an enormous help when COVID-19 made in-person contacts difficult. One of the researchers has worked in the community since 2002. The project advisory staff were all Rocinha residents and together with the research team had ample knowledge to suggest and make introductions to the creches used in the research.

Methods

Four early childhood centres were chosen as research sites, three of which had prior relationships with CIESPI. The 30 children (12 girls, 18 boys) involved in the project ranged from 3 to 7 years old. The children in each of the four groups were about the same age. The two senior researchers and two junior associates started each session by laying a colourful circular cloth on the floor for the children to sit on, suggesting a special place for the session.

The researchers started introductions by integrating humour and play. They created variations of children's names through tongue twisters, to welcome the children to the space and foster comfort. The team said they wanted to ask what the children thought about some things and brought with them a mystery box to 'break the ice'. There was a drawing of a boy and a girl on the box's lid and several other drawings in the box. The illustrations related to the three SIPP project themes of inclusion, participation and safety. The conversation started by asking the children what they saw in the drawings.

After initial greetings, the team laid one of the drawings on the floor and invited the children to say what was happening in it. The team then followed up with pre-planned open-ended questions about the project themes. As expected, the initial questions did not always

elicit a response so the questions were rephrased in ways to welcome different children's responses. For example, in one school with 5-year-olds, when beginning conversations about the theme of safety, the team realised that the question was not really understood and tried various versions of it alongside using the pictures as play-based prompts to support understanding. Safety was approached by asking the children when and where they felt scared and when they felt safe. Thus, the general question of 'do you feel safe' was broken down into concrete relatable sub-questions that the children could respond to. To explore the question of inclusion the team asked indirect questions such as 'whom do you play with?', 'how do you feel when you are playing with others?' and 'are there children who want to play but remain outside the games?'

In research with children, allowing for unplanned time and play-based activities to emerge supported children's trust, comfort, and reciprocal engagement (Wright, 2021). For example, in the 5-year-old group, towards the end of the session a young girl asked if we could we play musical chairs. Unfortunately, owing to time constraints, the researchers said that there was not enough time for that, and the girl then asked whether they could make drawings. The researchers agreed. The girl had one more suggestion, which was whether they could tell stories about their drawings. The children then laid out their drawings on the floor and told stories about the sequence of drawings. This play-based research approach that arose from the child's idea turned out to be a highly effective way for the children to share their own non-verbal and verbal communications, and in response drawing became part of all the group sessions. These kinds of flexible conversations or informal interviews require that the interviewers are able to adapt, listen and have good conversational skills, in our case especially with children (Gusmão & Porto, 2017; Kohan, 2019; Silva & Da Silva, 2021).

Reflections on methods

Concentrating on the learning from the creative and play-based methods we have three reflections: the need for research flexibility, in finding modes and questions that tap into children's knowledge and communication preferences; how tapping into concrete question about children's lived contexts often facilitated children to express their views; and how some abstract concepts were more accessible than others.

First, the research team needed to find ways to facilitate that aligned with the children's ways of engaging in the world and for the researchers to move outside of their adult understandings of conversations and questions. For example, in a group of 4-year-olds, there were substantial differences among the children in their understandings of the (adults') questions and approaches to respond to them. At the beginning of this session children were asked where they lived and, while one responded 'I do not know where I live', another child responded with an extensive explanation:

To arrive at my house I go up a stair case [most of the homes in the community were approached via alleys or concrete stairs] by the house of S. and then I go down some stairs and there is a black door and that is my home and my father has birds and they sing a lot until night and my mother works in a crèche and my father works a lot and arrives home at night very hungry.

Such differences encouraged the research team to use a range of methods and to ask questions in various ways, to respect the diversity of how children chose to communicate. Further, it suggested the need to value the 'small' as well as large contributions from children; as researchers, we can be tempted to privilege the extensive narratives, but the silences and shorter contributions can share important knowledge too (see Hanna, 2021).

Second, children's responses were closely tied to their lived contexts. This is exemplified by their answers to the concrete question: what are they afraid of? Answers included cockroaches (a frequent problem in crowded households in the sub-tropics), rats, the dark and heavy rains. In this hillside community, heavy rains in the rainy season often result in mud slides that can destroy streets and houses. The older children said that they would cry for help if frightened, while the younger children also said that they would call on their superheroes for help. Reflecting some of the centres' religious affiliations, in addition to asking their parents for help, children said they would also ask God. The constant knowledge of the presence of armed violence in the community was displayed by a young girl who, when asked why she had covered all her drawing sheet red, said: 'It is the blood of a young boy'. When asked why so much blood, she looked at the researcher for a moment and then returned to her drawing to finish colouring the entire sheet in red. As has been found in other studies, creative and play-based methods can elicit children's experiences of their lived contexts, but also perhaps because of this raise information that causes concern for children (Tisdall, 2015). Because of the research team's ongoing connections with Rochina and the community advisory approach to this case study, the research team has an ongoing commitment to address such problematic issues for their communities.

Third, while sometimes it worked well to break down the questions into more concrete connections to children's lived context, this worked less well with the concept of participation. In an attempt to do so, the research team asked children what they liked to do, then what they liked to do and could not, and why they could not. Participation was also approached by asking if they wanted to say something, were they heard. It took time for such questions to be engaging for children, although when they did so notable knowledge was shared. Responses ranged from putting up your hand to screaming and jumping on the floor when no one paid attention. By the time they were 6, children had a clear idea of what inhibited their actions. They talked about parents working too hard to take them to the beach, not being able to play outside because their parents would not let them, and one responding that her mother could not take her places because the mother had anxiety. Rather than asking directly about whether the children liked their school, the team asked what they liked about school and got quick responses, which cantered around being able to play and run around, having food, 'there are bananas, apples and even cake'. Thus, the perseverance of the research team to find accessible ways to find out about participation was eventually rewarded in terms of knowledge about different aspects of participation.

Overall, these responses show that young children reacted well to 'playful' and creative research methods, could respond to abstract themes when those themes were broken down into concrete examples, responded in ways that very much reflected their community environment, and while not always responding to their peers' substantive responses, picked up on the energies generated by those peers' participation.

VRYGROND, SOUTH AFRICA

Context

Vrygrond, 25 km from Cape Town, was one of South Africa's first informal settlements, and bears the legacy of decades of inequality. According to the 2011 Census, the 1 km² area houses over 40,000 people including at least 5000 children under the age of 5 years. The population is predominantly black African (62%) and Colouredⁱⁱⁱ (31%); 61% of the population live in formal dwellings and the rest live in shacks. The black African population includes many foreign nationals, mostly from Malawi and Zimbabwe. About 2000 children attend 34 ECE centres (most of which are unregistered) and a small number of parents and young

children participate in parenting support programmes. There are two primary schools and many service organisations and churches but no clinic or police station.

The vibrant and diverse community is characterised by high degrees of unemployment, with many informal traders. A substantial number of households depend on child support grants and charitable organisations for their basic needs. Violence, crime, substance abuse, food insecurity and poverty are common challenges.^{iv}

Methods

To explore children's understanding and experiences of safety, inclusion and participation we used a combination of methods, including play-based approaches, as springboards to conversation. Persona dolls were the main method. These are large, lifelike dolls made with careful attention to skin tone, hair and facial features and dressed like children (Biersteker & Smith, 2014). Each is given a name and 'persona' describing their family circumstances, culture, likes and dislikes, and concerns. They visit the children and share a story, which provides a stimulus for dialogue. They have been found useful for foregrounding children's voices in research (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2011) and for combatting the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2022) by having a persona similar to the children that they are visiting. Storytelling is significant in African culture/teaching and a familiar part of the ECE routine. To supplement the dolls, we used drawing/telling in a final session in which children were invited to draw a picture of anything that struck them from the sessions with the doll. Drawing/telling is widely used to elicit children's knowledge, opinions and thoughts (Cohrssen et al., 2022; Einarsdottir et al., 2009). In the session on safety, the doll shared some illustrations to elicit children's discussion of what made them feel safe or unsafe. These included scenes of family and friends, a child in the dark, a fierce dog, a police van and a mother scolding her children. All of the sessions also had opportunities for children to sing and to engage in responsive chants that they knew, to provide a change of pace and the chance to choose what they wanted to do.

A series of five sessions was delivered to six groups of five or six children, boys and girls of equal gender balance, aged 4–6 years. Groups included children from diverse cultural and language groups in the area. Four groups attended ECE centres that had previous exposure to persona dolls, and two groups involved children from fee-free parent and child support programmes and likely to be from poorer families. A series of five sessions of approximately 25 min each (introduction, a session each on participation, inclusion and safety, and closing) was designed and a story and activity guide for facilitators developed. Content, including the persona for the doll, was finalised with community advisors who work with vulnerable young children. Sessions were delivered by highly experienced and trained facilitators. The sessions were structured so that the sensitive topic of safety was offered once children were familiar with the process. Sessions were audiotaped and an observer documented proceedings including children's body language, levels of engagement and key observations.

Reflections on methods

The creative and play-based methods engaged children, aided by the research facilitators' considerable experience and children's involvement over a series of sessions. In reflecting on the methods, three aspects are notable: the engagement of children with the persona doll in particular; the efficacy (or not) of the methods in learning from children about three core project concepts; and the value of observation, as a complementary method.

First, while all three methods were engaging, children of both genders were especially receptive to the dolls. Each group had visits from a single doll. The facilitators used the doll to engage children by encouraging empathy and respect for the doll and one another, by telling children that he/she could not hear when they all spoke at once or asking them to all listen to each other. Engagement and identification with the doll, as well as care, were shown by the children spontaneously hugging him, asking whether he was cold, reporting how he was feeling and electing to sing to him. Many children expressed the wish to see him again.

Drawing was familiar to the ECE children involved in the research and thus was a useful creative and play-based methodology, as they could connect and were keen to draw a picture about what they had learned. For example, the inclusion session involved a story about the doll not being allowed to play ball with his friends. One child drew a boy and girl with a soccer ball and explained, 'a girl can also be his friend; he is teaching her to play soccer', so also challenging a local stereotype about boys and girls playing together while conforming with social norms of boys being the more common soccer players in games. Another drew a darkly shaded picture of a doll excluded from the play.

Second, using these methods, all three themes were addressed. For safety, the children shared freely about the dangers and protection they felt. They acted out how their bodies felt when they were scared. Some used an emoticon poster in their classroom to explain how they or the child in the story/picture might have felt. Family members and God were viewed as protection, as were their homes and ECE centres. However, danger was a dominating theme. Children across groups spoke of dangers including being stolen, hurt or killed by strangers, shot if you went out at night, road accidents and fires. In three groups, children spontaneously chanted the police helpline and fire brigade contact numbers. There was ambivalence about the police who are both seen as dangerous and a resource, for example, if you were lost at the mall. We understood from the discussion that safety issues limited participation and play in the community and that they mostly played at home.

Many examples were given of being excluded as well as the hurt, sad feeling this brought. They gave examples of children who are often excluded including those who pee in their pants or fall down, and an aggressive child in one preschool was the subject of much conversation. Children talked about coping strategies (both positive and potentially negative) when excluded such as to get your mommy to play with you, to tell teacher, play alone, find other children to play with you, and to fight the ones who will not let you play. Several children said that they should help others who were excluded in diverse ways—'pick up those who had fallen', 'share food with someone who does not have any', take them to school, share toys and to be kind to those who could not walk.

Participation as having a choice, or a say, was a more difficult concept for children to understand. However, it was clear that most children in the research had little sense of choice at school; for example, 'If I say I do not want porridge the teacher says you must finish your porridge' and 'We cannot tell teacher, teacher tells us'. This engendered strong feelings, such as 'I feel angry and sad when my teacher forces me to do something I do not want to do'. While most children expressed that they do not have a choice, there were some examples of their ability to express their preferences: 'My mother said she wanted me to be a doctor I told her that I do not want to be a doctor I want to be a fire fighter'. In some instances, they were firm about when they would be able to say no in everyday life: 'If I am asked to do dangerous things, I say no. No one can just force me to do things I do not want to do'. As such, children appeared to advocate for their rights in decision when it regarded issues of justice or protection.

This demonstrates that, while they are willing to take instructions from 'more powerful' others, they are unwilling to take those instructions without assessing whether it is dangerous or not. While the idea of participation was not easily understood, children expressed agency in other ways such as chanting a song, changing the topic or asking for a break. Two

groups chose whether to sit on chairs or the floor. In each of the groups one or two children appointed themselves as controllers, reminding others that one person should speak at a time and calling out those who were not concentrating. This poses power dynamics between children replicating adult–child power constructs in other spaces.

Because of language diversity in Vrygrond, English is mostly used as the medium of communication. While most children were proficient in English communication, it was not possible to tell whether it was vocabulary or a limited exposure to concepts of participation and inclusion that made it difficult to explore concepts. There was also some indication, widely noted in South African ECE settings, that children had limited vocabulary to express their feelings. As noted, one group used an emoticon chart to describe how they felt, and this visual aid might be useful aid for future use as a method to express and share feelings.

Third, we found considerable value in observational notes of embodied experiences and reactions to verbal and non-verbal dialogue. The research team paid attention to body language and when children were giggly, loud or silent and other behaviour. This provided significant insight into how some of the concepts were understood and were in fact being expressed. For example, a boy sat up straight when he said that he was not afraid at night because he prayed for protection. Some children did not speak when the doll shared that his friends would not let him play and their faces mirrored distress.

Tone of voice was a useful indicator of when children were relaying factual or imaginary experiences. While plausible dangers and unsafe situations were expressed in factual tones, dangers like the bogeyman or ghosts coming in the dark were expressed in tones of delicious excitement and comments such as that they could play anywhere and were not scared.

Overall, we found that children from ECE centres found it easier to engage with the focus groups, as they were familiar with story times and had all had some exposure to the persona dolls. In a non-centre-based programme, their regular facilitator assisted in supporting children to engage in discussion as they were unaccustomed to being asked to sit still and settle for a group time. The presence of a familiar adult may have assisted with the session but also constrained responses on some of the themes. Additional sessions would have been helpful to spread out conversations and allow for play and movement between discussion, in order explore the concepts in more depth. In conclusion, we found that using these different play-based methods and verbal and non-verbal dialogue approaches with children enabled them to express their lived experiences, likes and dislikes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Reflecting on learning from both community case studies, we suggest two themes that stretch across them: the fundamental acknowledgement that young children can express their views on quality ECE, despite some adults' continuing doubts; and how and to what extent creative and play-based, dialogical methods worked on certain topics and with children less familiar with working in groups. We consider how such methods can be part of critical pedagogy, as we were ourselves integrating them into practitioners' range of practices, and in turn a more contextually appropriate way to encourage quality in diverse communities. These points are further developed below.

Fundamentally, it is possible for young children to express their views, perspectives and feelings on key elements of quality and, we argue, they should be recognised and respected as key stakeholders in doing so. It is often that adults are less familiar with how to engage them effectively (e.g. trying to control children or requiring them to sit for lengthy periods of time) and how to best frame questions. The young children had perspectives that otherwise might not have been noticed and they had key contributions to how quality can and should

be defined. In both Brazil and South Africa—even though both countries have strong policies on children and young people's participation—there are adult stakeholders and policy-makers who do not recognise that younger children can express themselves and participate in decision-making. From a children's rights perspective, all children—whatever their age, gender, culture, religion, ability or socio-economic background—have rights to participate in all matters that affect them (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). From a childhood studies' perspective (Tisdall, 2018), the responsibility lies not on the children to be 'competent' or to express themselves in ways that adults prefer but instead on the *adults* (whether researchers, practitioners or policymakers) to listen, and find ways to respect and support children's communication.

In terms of our responsibility, as researchers, to support young children's meaningful participation and communication in our study, we can reflect on what worked well—and what did not work so well—from our perspectives. The involvement of community youth as both researchers and instructors brought energy, creativity and skills that helped in turn engage the children, in Rocinha. In both community case studies, the methods worked particularly well to engage with children on their meanings and experiences of safety, resulting in considerable information, expressed in different modes, and facilitated children to articulate very stark information on safety and violence in a supportive research context. The methods worked moderately well to engage with children on issues of inclusion, particularly in terms of which children might be excluded and why but resulted in less extensive data and less nuanced considerations of how inclusion could be enhanced. Engaging children on participation was the most difficult, with each research team needing to reframe questions and terms to find ways to communicate about this with the child participants. Children did become engaged when discussions were about likes, dislikes and 'choice'. However, while being able to choose is an aspect of participation, it is only one aspect of participation: participation can also be about contributing to decisions, being part of problem solving and sharing information. 'Choice' can be tokenistically applied at home and in learning settings (e.g. choosing the types of snacks, but not fundamental issues about learning; Tisdall, 2012). Thus, the play-based and creative methods we used as adults did not 'tap into' children's wider experiences of participation as well as they did on other topics; this may be due to children's limited opportunities and understanding of participation (or the word itself) in general owing to their lack of participation in many settings. However, they did result in very distinct expressions of frustration from some children about their lack of participation in certain contexts (e.g. the child from Rocinha, who said they screamed and jumped on the floor to gain attention); this fits with findings from adults (caregivers, practitioners and policymakers) in the project, who did not easily engage with the idea that young children could participate in decision making. If young children's participation is not encouraged in ECE more generally, asking young children to articulate what participation means to them may prove more difficult. Whether children had the repertoires to discuss certain (abstract) concepts and feelings greatly affected how open the prompts could be with the children, for discussions.

Observation was a particularly useful method, to fine-tune the methods and as research data. The additional physical and emotional expressions from the children made important contributions, whether to underline the importance of certain topics (e.g. on safety) or to provide insights into participation, which children verbalised less confidently. While a quite common finding in childhood studies research (Brady & Graham, 2019; Tisdall, 2015), the materiality of the activities enhanced the engagement and communication of the child participants, providing a focus and an expression for them on what can be more abstract concepts.

In both case studies, children were engaged with in groups. This again is a familiar recommendation in childhood studies research. As with all focus groups, this approach has the potential for children to talk among themselves, sharing and building off each other ideas,

which can be useful ways to address research questions (Tisdall et al., 2009). Further, groups are often recommended because such peer-to-peer discussion, and the higher numbers of children to adults, can help children feel more comfortable communicating and lessen the hierarchical power of the adults, which might inhibit children from expressing themselves (Punch, 2002). While the groups were successful in encouraging children's discussion, they were less successful in lessening adult power; as noted above, the researchers did find themselves at times concerned about 'keeping order', which sits uneasily with the ethical and participative stance of the research teams and project. Both research teams found certain approaches helpful, like investing in preparatory conversations with the ECE staff for mutual support and welcoming the children, changing the pace (such as introducing a song or a quick physical activity) and using games or material objects. Nonetheless, the research team found the need for continual balance to encourage focus on the research agenda while respecting children's own wishes and what they considered relevant.

Further, this was particularly for children with less experience of ECE settings (and, with lockdown owing to COVID 19, children in these communities had often lost access to such settings and learning), and thus presumably less experience of needing to keep such group and individual order. This raises questions, then, about how to ensure methods are inclusive of children who are *not* in ECE settings nor particularly comfortable being asked to sit still and work in groups and foster spaces for play and movement. For many questions of quality, the views of those who do not access ECE, or have problems doing so, are important to know; thus, these are methodological issues to address.

The methods used are congruent with a focus on process, in determining and assessing quality, and indeed the practices of critical pedagogy as described above. Such methods show the possibilities—and the importance—of ensuring that quality is determined, assessed and nurtured in contextually appropriate and nuanced ways in partnership with children themselves. Substantive findings for quality ECE included the importance of safe outdoor spaces for children to play, the lack of participation opportunities for children in ECE, the desire by children to have more say, the necessity of adults being supportive of children's participation and how peers as well as ECE staff can aid or detract from other children's inclusion. Play, food, relationships and recourse to a supportive teacher to solve difficulties were highly valued by the children in South Africa. The research also sharply shows that some fundamentals are not considered in the universal statements of quality rolled out in the literature and international policy and miss certain basics that facilitate children and their families to engage with ECE—such as the very real need to travel to and from ECE provision safely. To be able to participate in ECE, one must be able to access it, financially, physically and safely.

A critical pedagogy approach provides an alternative and deliberative one, building up from the context, the stakeholders and the community, for ongoing quality enhancement. It is based on meaningful relationships, it does take time, and it does require all participants (adults and children) to enhance the ways they play, work and communicate together. These elements do not lead to an easily applied, large-scale, quantifiable list of indicators for quality ECE. A critical pedagogy with play-based methods, however, can help ensure that the SDG goals are met for inclusive, safe, participatory and equitable education and learning opportunities for all children, that are contextual, reflective, implementable, appropriate and sustainable in communities in various parts of the world and that face deep-seated inequalities and poverty.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All archivable data for the SIPP project will be available on UK Data Archive by October 2024.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ The qualitative case studies are one strand in a multi-strand project: the other strands include wider stakeholder engagement and interviews, policy and systems analysis, and an economic burden of violence study particularly for young children. Further information about the project can be found at <https://www.sipp.education.ed.ac.uk/>.
- ⁱⁱ In this article, the terms Global North and Global South are used to refer to groups of countries that previously might have been referred to as developing and developed nations. We recognise the problems of this binary, as countries can differ substantially with these categories. We recognise that the 'Majority World'—in relation to population, poverty, land mass and lifestyles—rests in the Global South, while the Global North is the 'Minority World' (Punch & Tisdall, 2012).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Under the apartheid state, the South African population was classified according to race—White, Coloured (persons of mixed origin), Asian or African (further categorised by ethnicity).
- ^{iv} Administrative data from <https://www.true-north.co.za/eecd-project/>.

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