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Hierarchies of knowledge, incommensurabilities and silences in South African ECD policy: Whose knowledge counts?

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Abstract: Policy for young children in South Africa is now receiving high-level gov-
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inequity and creating 'a better life for all' as promised before the 1994 election. In
this article, I explore the power relations, knowledge hierarchies and discourses of
childhood, family and society in National Curriculum Framework (NCF) as it relates
to children's everyday contexts. I throw light on how the curriculum's discourses
relate to the diverse South African settings, child rearing practices and world-views,
and how they interact with normative discourses of South African policy and global
early childhood frameworks. The NCF acknowledges indigenous and local knowl-
edges and suggests that the content should be adapted to local contexts. I argue that
the good intentions of these documents to address inequities are undermined by the
uncritical acceptance of global taken-for-granted discourses, such as narrow notions
of evidence, western child development, understanding of the child as a return of in-
vestment and referencing urban middle class community contexts and values. These
global discourses make the poorest children and their families invisible, and silence
other visions of childhood and good society, including the notion of 'convivial society'
set out in the 1955 Freedom Charter.

Keywords: indigenous knowledges, subjugated knowledge, early childhood develop-
ment, South Africa, authoethnography, curriculum, policy.

Introduction

Policy for young children in South Africa provides much to celebrate in 2017. Early Childhood Development (ECD) has slowly gained legitimacy during the 20 years of democratic rule. The 2012 ANC conference identified the provision of ECD as a national priority in the government's 2030 Vision and National Development Plan (NDP) published in 2011. ECD is now receiving high-level government support through the ANC's renewed commitment to redress poverty and inequity and creating 'a better life for all'[1] as promised before the 1994 election. As part of the development of Vision 2030, a separate diagnostic review was commissioned to assess the state of South African ECD policy and implementation (Richter et al., 2012). This report informed the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (RSA, 2015) and the South African National Curriculum Framework for children from Birth to Four (NCF) (Department of Basic Education, 2015a) which I refer to as the NCF.

In this article, I explore the power relations, knowledge hierarchies and discourses of childhood, family and society in the NCF and how those relate to children's everyday contexts. I throw light on how the curriculum's discourses relate to the diverse South African settings, child rearing practices and world-views, and how they interact with normative discourses of South African policy and global early childhood frameworks. The NCF acknowledges indigenous and local knowledges and suggests that its content should be adapted to local contexts. I argue that the good intentions of these documents to address inequities are undermined by the uncritical acceptance of global taken-for-granted discourses, such as narrow notions of evidence, western child development, understanding of the child as a return of investment and referencing urban middle class community contexts and values. These global discourses make the poorest children and their families invisible, and silence other visions of childhood and good society, including the notion of 'convivial society' set out in the 1955 Freedom Charter.

To describe the contexts of children's lives, I use an autoethnographic method. I outline different visions of childhood and society that are present in these different contexts I have encountered through living and working in remote rural villages and informal settlements. I briefly introduce my theoretical and methodological framework before analysing the NCF.

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[1] 'A better life' is understood in terms of rights, protection against discrimination, and extended access to basic services

Policy-as-discourse and Autoethnography

In order to highlight the ways in which power operates through policy, I use, what Carol Bacchi (2000, 2009, 1999) and others refer to as 'policy-as-discourse' analysis. I pay attention to the relationship between 'knowledge' (such as human science and indigenous knowledges or ways of being) referred to or referenced in policy and the meaning of 'subjugated' knowledge (Bacchi, 2009). Subjugated knowledge, according to Foucault (1980), is has been disqualified as inadequate or insufficiently elaborated, or a body of knowledge that is considered as missing scientificity. 'Evidence-based' policy making in South Africa prioritises scientific knowledge over other knowledges and thus influences "who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 237) and whose ideas are heard and considered important, relevant or useful. I pay close attention to the discursive power of policy texts and the way they construct actors (experts, children, families and communities) and the kind of knowledges they draw upon and subjugate to establish 'truths' about the care, education and development of children.

Carol Bacchi (2000, 2009, 1999) challenges the traditional view of policy as solving identified problems and suggests that 'problems' are generated in the kind of change implied in particular policy proposals. From this perspective policy can be viewed as a strategic and political process in which concepts and categories are used to influence ongoing practices. As Bacchi explains, "what someone proposes to do about something reveals what they think needs to change" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 263). That is, they assess, even if in unexpressed ways the problem that the policy aims to solve. I therefore understand policy as discourse that constructs a picture about the problem and how we need to understand it. Bacchi identifies the special role "of the intellectually and professionally trained, whether in state employment or in civil society" in policy making and the consequent power relations, especially in terms of possibilities for action (Bacchi, 2000, p. 52). It is important to note that in South Africa, intellectually and professionally trained people have all succeeded in a system of education strongly influenced by colonial apartheid schooling. Those who produce policy texts do not only "assign positions and value to groups within policy discourses" but also prioritise certain knowledges and experiences that are being used to provide context, evidence or legitimation to the proposed changes or applications (Bacchi, 2000 p. 54).

Having been a participant over three decades in various processes concerned with the wellbeing of young children, their families and communities,

I use an autoethnographic approach to complement this policy-as-discourse analysis. I do so to cast light on various discourses that are in operation in current South African ECD policy in relation to particular communities' experiences and knowledges they draw upon. Heewon Chang explains that, "autoethnography utilizes the ethnographic research methods and is concerned about the cultural connection between self and others representing the society" (Chang, 2008, p. 2). Chang's explanation refers to current literature, including authors, such as Ellis, Bochner and Reed-Danahay, who all emphasize that ethnographic inquiry utilizes the autobiographic materials of the researcher as the primary data (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Unlike most autoethnographic studies, this desk review draws on my memories, field notes and an archive of historical documents, rather than collecting fresh field data specifically for the study through participant observation or interviews. My roles during this period, included three major contexts: first, establishing an NGO called Woz'obona with its own unique approach developed through dialogue in participating communities; second, conceptualising and guiding the provincial Gauteng Department of Education's Impilo Project; and third, leading the Children's Institute Caring Schools action research project.

While my employment shifted from non-government organisation to government employee, then to university staff member, the participatory action research approaches I used across all three periods and in many different contexts linked theory (knowledge) and practice (experience) through dialogue (Biersteker & Rudolph, 2005; Rudolph, 1996, 2003; Rudolph & James, 2015). These methods that evolved through practice have been particularly helpful in recognising in communities what Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to as 'abyssal thinking' (Santos, 2007), the devaluation and subjugation of non-western knowledges. Santos argues that the model of radical exclusion dividing the human from the sub-human provided by the colonial period "prevails in modern western thinking and practice today as it did during the colonial cycle" (Santos, 2007, p. 10). According to Santos, modern western thinking is a system of visible and invisible distinctions that divide social reality into two realms that make what is in the other realm (or on the other side of the line) invisible or non-existent. As a result, "popular, lay, plebeian, peasant, or indigenous knowledges … vanish as commensurable or relevant knowledges" (Santos, 2007, p. 4). In bringing forth subjugated knowledges based on my experiences with these communities, I am constantly prompted to question many of my own western assumptions that have been normalized as truth.

Michael Cross (2015) addresses the relations of power and knowledges in recent curriculum policy in South Africa. He examines the way that knowledges are "combined or rank-ordered", not only in relation to "prevailing epistemological assumptions, but also with reference to issues of power and interests in the communities involved' (Cross, 2015, p. 38). He explains how, what he refers to as 'hierarchies of knowledge' generates bias in relation to policy ideas, with a strong tendency to unproblematically follow precedent and in particular seek to replicate 'best practice'. The assumptions underlying each form of knowledge produces different criteria for judging policy and experience, thus dominating analysis and debate in the policy process to address certain problems deemed to be present in society. In Crosss's words (2015, p. 38), "[l]esser knowledges become marginalised in the light of the dominance of others". This is particularly pertinent in taking account of diverse African complexities (Cross, 2015). However, Cross stresses that these hierarchies are not fixed and are locally constituted and reconstituted in the policy arena through "dynamic compromises between competing forms of knowledge and knowledge producers" in the changing political context (Cross, 2015, p. 53). He explains that

> local and global knowledges are intrinsically mingled together; indigenous forms of knowledge are contested, reinterpreted and integrated into global knowledge. The dynamics of appropriation have changed the boundaries and the knowledge interface in the hierarchies. Similarly, the localisation of global knowledge has become an important feature of globalisation with intensification of policy borrowings and the integration of research knowledge with other competing forms of knowledge: 'embodied knowledge' in project and programme experiences, participatory knowledge (specific communities of practice), or knowledge in different combinations. (Cross, 2015, pp. 53-54)

In this policy analysis, I respond to Cross's call for 'epistemic reflexivity' and 'relational thinking' to point to taken-for-granted assumptions and unhelpful dichotomies. I look specifically at how 'family' and 'indigenous and local knowledge' are talked about in the NCF to throw light on power relations, silences and possible implications in the context of extreme diversity in South Africa. I draw on my experience in a variety of different local contexts and my understanding of the interplay of policy, action, experiences and the different forms of knowledge.

What is the Intended Direction of Change in ECD Policy in South Africa?

After the 1994 election, the term Early Childhood Development (ECD) was introduced and defined as "an umbrella term, which applies to the processes by which children from birth to at least 9 years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially" (Department of Education, 1996, p. 3). Despite this broad definition of ECD, only a single-year pre-school programme for children in the year before entering the first grade of primary school, referred to as Grade R, has been "systematically introduced and expanded" as the primary focus of ANC government ECD policy "with the intention of preparing children from low socio-economic status communities for primary schooling" (Samuels et al., 2015, p. 1).

In 2010, President Zuma established the National Planning Commission (NPC) to undertake an independent critical review of South Africa and produce a vision and plan for the country given the poor progress during ANC rule in addressing poverty and inequality. The NPC initiated a diagnostic analysis to identify and examine key challenges and obstacles that impact on social and economic development. Subsequently, the NPC Diagnostic Report outlined nine challenges affecting the development of South Africa, including 'poor education outcomes' (RSA, 2011). The NPC review process included a separate diagnostic review of ECD published in 2012 that emphasised the importance of the early years and especially the first 1000 days from conception. The new focus of ECD including services from conception to four years was included as a priority in the NDP (2011) as part of the strategy for improving education outcomes in order to reduce poverty and inequality.

The 2015 National Integrated ECD Policy (NIECDP) aims to address critical gaps and "ensure the provision of comprehensive, universally available and equitable ECD services" (RSA, 2015, p. 8). It proposes a package of services: "Health care and nutrition programmes; Social protection programme; Parent support programmes; Opportunities for learning; National public early childhood development communications; Water, sanitation, refuse removal and energy sources; Food security; and Play facilities, sport and culture" (RSA, 2015, pp. 8-9). My focus in this article is the NCF that supplements the NIECDP by providing the curriculum framework for parents, caregivers and service providers in different programmes, targeting children under 4 years of age, including family and community support services (Department of Basic Education, 2015a). I quote from both of the two separate versions

of the NCF, the 'abridged version' (Department of Basic Education, 2015b) and the 'aomprehensive version' (Department of Basic Education, 2015a). The abridged version has been condensed into fewer pages and has been 'simplified' to make it easier to understand[2].

In the words of the Minister, "[t]he NCF comes at a time when we are celebrating 20 years of democracy in our country and it is one of the activities aimed at improving the quality of basic education by laying a solid foundation in the early years" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. iii). In her foreword to the South African National Curriculum Framework for children from Birth to Four (NCF) (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. iii), the Minister of Basic Education, quotes from National Development Plan titled *Vision for 2030* (2011):

> Delays in cognitive and overall development before schooling can often have long lasting and costly consequences for children, families and society. The most effective and cost-efficient time to intervene is before birth and the early years of life. Investment in Early Childhood Development should be a key priority. (National Development Plan: Vision for 2030, 2011)

This statement identifies the 'problem' as 'cognitive and overall developmental delays' in children. Defining the problem in individualistic, development and economic terms reflects international child development discourses in recent global policy (Ebrahim, 2014; Lightfoot-Rueda & Peach, 2015; Millei & Joronen, 2016). The economic focus of the policy also constructs 'childhood' and 'ECD' in terms of the human capital rationale, that is 'return on investment' measured in educational achievement. By describing the purpose of the NCF as "improving children's learning experiences" and preparing young children for schooling, the Minister in her foreword (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. iii) focuses narrowly on the child's developmental potential to succeed at school and links this directly to the economy. Thus, she minimises other responsibilities of the government, such as to provide better living conditions in order to ensure better achievement and general wellbeing. This discourse cuts off socio-economic and cultural contexts in which growing children are embedded and narrows development to

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[2] Both versions of the NCF are aimed at adults working with children from birth to four and include an overlapping list of user groups, such as 'Parents and caregivers', 'ECD practitioners' and 'monitoring personnel'. However, the category of/educator and is only listed in the comprehensive version. The category, 'Training providers', is only mentioned in the user list of the abridged version.

the cognitive domain. It also links the development of children to the development of the nation, its economic prosperity (Burman, 2008; Millei & Imre, 2016). Anchoring the problem of childhood in the NCF in these economic and psychological frames narrows notions of 'what good childhood' is and silences other possible knowledges and perspectives (Moss, 2015).

Concepts of childhood are social constructions (James & James, 2004) that change across time and place, and as such must be considered in relation to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and other categories and as shaped by cultural, social and political contexts. These shifting and contextually dependent constructions of childhood, and the bodies of knowledge they draw from, stand in contestation with each other and have often unexpected effects. Changes in constructions of childhood are a product of adult-child relations located within the broader social, political and economic frameworks that structure societies and which give shape to the institutional arrangements – work, schools, families, churches – through which children's daily lives unfold (James & James, 2004). For example, the influence of international organisations, such as UNICEF in advocating for a unified voice to mobilise resources with the intention to improve children's living conditions, undermines debates and acknowledgments of the multiple constructions prevalent in local communities' knowledge that exceed the policies' understanding of childhood (Morabito, Vandenbroek, & Roose, 2013). In another example, Nieuwenhuys (2010), contrasts the perspectives of the 'international community' "armed with international conventions, a body of knowledge and specialists, media spectacles and an array of symbolic goods" with the "fragmentary, fleeting and contradictory ideas and practices that are part and parcel of the business of real-life people crafting a future for the next generation" (Nieuwenhuys 2010, p. 292).

Following Bacchi's approach to policy analysis, I trace how this representation of the 'problem' further unfolds in the curriculum, and with the help of the autoethnographic stories I disrupt them (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2) to create spaces for alternative understandings.

How do the NCF constructions of 'family' accommodate South African Complexity and Diversity?

In the terminology section of the NCF "parents refers to the main caregiver of the child" and "families refers to people with whom the child lives" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a). Both 'parents' and 'families' are

referred to differently in different parts of both the abridged and comprehensive versions of the NCF. According to the first key idea in the abridged version:

> Families are made up of people who choose to live together and care for each other. Families are the first teachers of their children. It is from the family that children learn about beliefs, values, customs and manners and what it means to be loved and cared for. Families that support, guide and encourage children help them to value themselves. (Department of Basic Education, 2015b, p. 2)

This ideal image of the family is promising in terms of ECD aims, however this construction of 'family' does not accommodate the extreme diversity of childhoods in South Africa. For example, my experience of 'family' in Msinga, where most families are polygamous with many men and a smaller number of women working as migrants on the mines or in domestic employment in the cities, rubs against the notion of family portrayed in the policy.

The Children's Institute (CI) website uses the most recent statistics to describe the circumstances of children and offers yet another view on family. A long-established feature of childhoods in South Africa relates to factors, such as historic population control, labour migration, poverty, housing and educational opportunities, low marriage rates and cultural practice that leaves many children not living consistently in the same dwelling as their biological parents. Relatives often take over child-rearing roles as circumstances change so that many children experience a sequence of different caregivers and do not necessarily live in the same household as their biological parents or siblings (Children's Institute, 2016). The construction of 'family' for most children is neither a matter of choice nor defined by a common 'dwelling' or 'household'.

The NCF does not explicitly acknowledge the role of siblings in the socialization and learning of young children, except for reference to 'buddies[3]'. In many villages in South Africa, children spend time together in fairly stable mixed age groups called 'ubungani', meaning 'friendship', 'comradeship' or 'playing together' in isiZulu and isiNdebele. Swart and colleagues (1996) provide a description of these friendship groups, and

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[3] 'Buddies' refers to older children who offer child-to-child ECD interventions usually through ECD NGOs

Marfo and Biersteker (2010) refer to Swart et al (1996) explaining that similar constructions are used in other South African languages, such as Sotho (Marfo & Biersteker, 2010). These groups are recognized by adults and foster a sense of security, spirit of communalism and mutual respect (Swart et al., 1996). Together with others in their neighbourhood, children collectively take care of their siblings and learn through collaboration. Somè (1995) explains that these friendship groups continue through adulthood and play the role of the family in children's lives performing important pedagogical roles.

Living in Msinga in about 1980, as an apprentice in the culture (with extremely limited isiZulu language skills) I most enjoyed learning with the youngest ubungani (between about two and 8 years old) in activities, such as harvesting edible green leaves called 'imifino' in isiZulu. This is a regular activity for women and girls when there has been rain. One of the older children would identify one variety and direct us all to collect the same variety on that day. As I learned to recognize more and more edible varieties, I was perplexed about the requirement to only pick one variety as we could have picked much more if we picked all the edible varieties. After all, food was scarce! In my yearning for efficiency, I pondered on this question for some time, until I understood that picking only one variety at a time helped the cook check for inedible varieties when she prepared them for the pot. It would have been much more difficult to identify the errors in a mixture of different varieties. In the ubungani, the experts are older children who have mastered an understanding of edible varieties. There is no competition. All contribute according to capacity and the harvest is pooled and allocated according to need. I continue to be enthralled by this example of collaborative learning and interdependence.

The construction and pedagogical role of 'parents' and 'families' in the NCF require further problematisation. The comprehensive version of the NCF notes that "Families[4] in their many forms are the primary educators of their children and must be included in ECD programmes" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 5). This reference to different forms of families is absent in the abridged version and neither version discusses the variety of forms that families might take. There is no discussion of the diversity of care-giving arrangements in relation to this construction of 'parent'. Each

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[4]   'Family' is defined as "Individuals, who either by contract or agreement, choose to live together and provide care, nurturing and socialisation for one another" see glossary comprehensive version p.78

activity in the NCF (comprehensive version) has a column with the heading, "Broad Assessment guidelines for watching, listening, noting, reporting, discussing with parents and referring for specialist attention where necessary"(Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 19). The NCF is intended for use in a variety of programmes and settings including, ECD centres, homes, neighbourhoods and institutions where children in the early years are cared for (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 1). However, the emphasis throughout the document is on a 'practitioner' reporting to a 'parent', which prioritises ECD settings, such as centres rather than the homes and neighbourhoods in which most young children are cared for. For most people in South Africa, the term 'ECD' refers to 'ECD centres' or 'institutions' although for most marginalised and remote communities, it is neither affordable nor feasible for many children under-four years to be in that kind of setting.

The NCF lists "parents and family of the child" as one of three sets of people "who need to be kept informed of each child's needs and interests" "informally when parents bring and collect the child each day" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, pp. 24-25). There is an acknowledgement that, "[i]f another adult or older sibling is in charge of delivering and fetching the child, the parents will have to give permission for more in-depth discussions to take place, and they need to be informed in writing of any incidents" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 25). The assumption that there is always someone who brings and fetches the child does not fit with my vivid memory of young children walking long distances alone to the nearest ECD service. These children appear invisible in the NCF, which also suggests that other forms of discussion happen "informally through phone calls and notes to parents in the child's home-programme notebook" or "formally through individual parent-practitioner meetings which are arranged in advance (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 25). This image of a literate parent who delivers and collects his/her child and with whom the practitioner or teacher discusses observations and progress of individual children on a regular basis probably comes from practices in ECD centres in urban contexts. It does not take account of distances between homes and services, the absence of private or public transport, low literacy rates and whether either the parent or practitioner can afford telephone airtime in the poorest communities.

According to the CI Statistics on children in South Africa, only 77% of children in South Africa live in housing that would qualify as 'habitable' according to United Nations' standards (Children's Institute, 2016). The rest

live in informal or traditional housing[5]. 'Informal housing' could be: informal dwellings, shacks or rooms in backyards or informal settlements, caravans or tents. Disaggregating the data by age, 41% of children living in informal housing are 0-5 years of age. The CI statistics also show that the homes of 31% of children do not have access to adequate clean drinking water drinking water and 26% do not have access to adequate sanitation and 10% live in households without an electricity connection. This of course does not mean that all of the other 90% can afford the cost of electricity supply and appliances. Goldberg (2009) explains that privatized home ownership while making electricity available to more people also reduced utility subsidies increasing the cost to consumers, "making them increasingly unaffordable to larger and larger groups of almost exclusively black residents" (Goldberg, 2009, p. 258). What is more significant is the disaggregated data that shows that 27% of children in informal dwellings and 30% of children in traditional dwellings do not have any electric connection in their homes. The lives of young children reflected in these statistics are clearly not foregrounded in the construction of 'families' in the NCF. This is just one example of the neoliberal influences in post-apartheid education reform and the knowledge it draws on in relation to rearing young children and the pedagogical work that is undertaken to learn to live within these circumstances. These influences are well documented in an extensive literature drawing attention to the absence of complex understandings "of the interplay of race, class, and space in educational contexts" (Goldberg, 2009; Postma, Spreen, & Vally, 2015; Soudien, 2010; Subreenduth, 2013).

The youngest children living in informal dwellings, and the child raising practices and knowledge accommodated to those difficult circumstances are disproportionately represented in the NCF. Pedagogical considerations concerning the construction of 'family' in the NCF do not reflect the lives of these children and they do not respect and build on the pedagogical work that takes place in 'extended' and 'disadvantaged' families. There are no spaces in the curriculum for making the necessary adaptations to these 'local' circumstances. In addition, the high mobility of young children between rural and urban informal settlements raises the question of what 'local' would mean for poor highly mobile children living in 'informal' dwellings and what 'knowledge' would shape their identities and belonging as discussed in the next section.

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[5]   These dwelling types used by CI as data source are listed in the General Household Survey

How is 'Indigenous and Local Knowledge' constructed in the NCF?

Despite differences in urbanization, class, tribal affiliation, religion and geographical location across the African continent, many authors have nevertheless written of an African cosmology or worldview that reflects basic universal themes. (Eagle, 2005, p. 201 referring to Airhihenbuwa, 1995; Buhrmann, 1984; Shutte, 1994)

Indigenous knowledge is defined in the NCF glossary as "knowledge which is held by families, and groups" and is

> passed down from generation to generation. Local knowledge and practice is that which is used in geographical regions. This curriculum framework promotes the use of that indigenous and local knowledge and practices about babies, toddlers and young children, which enhances their development and learning. (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 79)

While the NCF acknowledges 'indigenous knowledge', there is no discussion of how this knowledge relates to 'scientific' knowledge. The NCF is also silent on the spiritual dimension of indigenous African knowledge and there is no mention of ancestors, despite using the 1996 definition of ECD that includes 'spiritual development'[6].

Western and African view of knowledge

Let me discuss here briefly what the curriculum framework might reference as indigenous and local knowledges to show the ways the document actually is not grounded in this view. Rather, this worldview appears as an add-on to dominant western views of the child and his or her culture. The quotation below the section heading highlights the universal themes of African cosmology, which I foreground in my analysis. I include the often forgotten Southern African first peoples, particularly the nomadic San hunter-gatherers and the Khoi pastoralists and herders. While constructions of 'indigenous and local knowledges' feature in recent South African ECD policy, I do not think that sufficient attention is given to what Gillian

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6   The glossary on page 78 of the comprehensive version of the NCF explains "Early childhood development is an umbrella term that applies to the processes by which children from birth to at least nine years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially".

Eagle (2005) identifies as some of the "key premises" that "underpin the differences in 'western' and 'African' world-views" (Eagle, 2005, p. 201). In particular, colonial discourses have subjugated "many pre-modern characteristics, such as the entertainment of animistic and magical thinking and belief in the power of natural and supernatural forces" (Eagle, 2005). Keane and others (2016) drawing on Aikenhead (2002) and Khupe (2014) explain that in many indigenous cultures there is no emphasis on 'knowledge' as a noun, an object or abstracted product, but knowledge is "rather expressed as a 'way of being', 'a way of knowing', 'a way of living in nature' and 'a way of belonging'" (Keane, Khupe, & Muza, 2016, p. 4). This contrasts strongly with the western notion of knowledge as a commodity separate from ourselves (Keane et al., 2016).

Ubuntu, ancestors and relatedness

African philosophy and thinking is rooted in two fundamental concepts: ubuntu[7] (connection and belonging) and the significant role that ancestors play in maintaining social harmony (Eagle, 2005; Mji, 2012 referring to Berg 2003). From this perspective, there is not a clear binary relationship between mind and body or the 'dead' and the 'living'. The dead continue to live on as 'shades' and play a very important part as guides and mentors in the family with elders as future ancestors acting as mediators between the living and the dead (Rico, 2016). The benign symbiotic influence of omnipresent ancestors is all embracing "with the living keeping the deceased in mind and honouring them through ceremonies, and in return receiving their protection" (Mji, 2012, p. 49). This construction of 'ubuntu' resonates with Howells' (2014) construction of 'gratitude' in the statement of an Australian Aboriginal woman she quotes: "we do not feel gratitude for ourselves, we feel it for our whole people, and it also connects us to our ancestors" (Howells, 2014, p. 42). Howell distinguishes between the western construction of 'gratitude for' understood as an emotion, and the indigenous construction of 'gratitude to' understood as an action (Howells, 2014, p. 43). Howell acknowledges that while 'gratitude for' might be a starting point, it cannot be complete 'gratitude', which is always embedded in the context of relatedness (Howells, 2014). In Howells' words, "… it is our recognition of our connectedness, which many writers, such as Martin Buber, Carl Jung, Charles Taylor, Margaret Sommerville, and Sooren Kierkergaard, have argued is at the heart of our relatedness …. that is also crucial to many indigenous notions of gratitude" (Howells, 2014, p. 47).

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[7] 'Ubuntu' is an African word depicting humanity and compassion.

Constructions of 'identity' from this perspective of relatedness are collective rather than individualistic (Keane et al., 2016). Maintaining 'harmonious relations' is critical for good health (Mji, 2012). 'Harmonious relations' refers not only to relations among humans (living and dead) but all dimensions of material and spirit worlds. My understanding of this construction acknowledges that conflict of different kinds is inevitable in all contexts. Consequently, 'harmonious relations' does not assume an absence of conflict, but a world-view based on interdependence. Harmony is sought through paying attention to dreams and messages from the spiritual world as well as conversation, guidance from elders and negotiation. It is about listening to the 'outside' and the 'inside' and accommodating multiple perspectives that can co-exist as equal.

Margaret Somerville presents a similar Australian indigenous multidimensional notion of 'Country', that is "sentient" and "consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air" (Somerville, 2014, p. 184). Somé, Rico, Somerville, Santos and others all promote similar frameworks for distinguishing between indigenous and western ways of thinking and negotiating our participation as the human species in complex ecological systems. Somé (1995) describes western knowledge as "stiff and inflexible" on account of being "wrapped in logical rhetoric" (Somé, 1995, p. 204) and vividly portrays the institutional racism and exploitative economies of colonialism.

Somé positions himself as highlighting the differences in constructions of knowledge and making African cosmology more accessible to the West as opposed to judging one worldview as better than the other. Similarly, Santos, calls for a different kind of thinking referred to as "post-abyssal thinking" and argues that the "struggle for global social justice must be a struggle for global cognitive justice as well" (Santos, 2007, p. 1). In agreement with these thinkers, Raymond Suttner argues, drawing on the history and heritage of the Freedom Charter, for "bringing into focus unacknowledged knowledge, especially the questions of orality and communication with the ancestors"(Suttner, 2006, p. 3). The NCF fails to do this work. Rather, it creates a hierarchy of knowledge privileging the powerful western worldview and scientific bodies of knowledge over indigenous ones. In this hierarchy, it becomes easy to erase indigenous knowledges as less relevant or evaluate them as providing less legitimation and 'best practice' for ECD in the current international context.

Identity and belonging in a 'material' world

The NCF constructs the 'world of the child' in material terms in the section on 'Knowledge and understanding the world':

> Children's worlds include their immediate surroundings (people, animals, vegetables and minerals of all kinds); the history of their own families and later on their neighbourhoods; the geography of their surroundings (for example, hills, rivers, flat spaces, rocks, weather and climate) and the tools that they use such as pencils, scissors, cutlery, household equipment on to cameras, mobile phones, computers (technology). (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 65)

This description is borrowed from a United Kingdom publication[8] and it is this construction of the world used in the entire section. In this construction, the spiritual world is absent. I remember an occasion when one young child reported that she had seen her mother the previous night. A well-intentioned ECD practitioner who knew that the child's mother had recently died gently explained to the child that that was impossible. The indigenous knowledge of ancestors is particularly pertinent in helping young children deal with death in communities in the context of the AIDS pandemic. The teacher however remained insensitive or ignorant of this worldview that could have eased the child's feeling of loss.

Similarly, the notion of 'relatedness' as it links to belonging and identity discussed below is overridden by the values of modernity and the drive to "shape subjects" fit for the competitive global market (Moss, 2015, p. 231). The focus on the 'development' of the individual child that must be observed and recorded eclipses the image of collective friendship, for example, in the ubungani groups, where 'knowledge' is a way of being, rather than a 'thing' to be acquired. In addition, the material world represented in the NCF would be out of reach for the 41% of children living in traditional or informal housing without electricity. I would imagine it would be challenging for anyone outside of the middle-class to adapt examples of technology, such as 'electronic toys and computers' to local contexts.

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[8] Department for Education and Skills, 2007. Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage. Setting standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. DfES publications.

The NCF promotes helping children know "where and with whom they belong" through a "sense of group identity and sense of celebrating difference" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 33). 'Belonging' and 'identity' are "about personal development, social development, secure relationships and celebrating difference" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 32).

> Belonging is related to children's identity: When children have a strong sense of belonging then they have secure relationships with adults and/or communities that have certain values, traditions and beliefs. This gives them messages of how they depend on other people to make sense of themselves. A sense of belonging helps them to know where and with whom they belong. (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 32)

These constructions are based on ideal notions of 'family' and 'community' that do not accommodate the hardships of poverty and the AIDS pandemic that break down family and community ties as illustrated by this story told by research participant from a non-government service organisation:

> A young child lived in the plots with both parents, not having any other families or relatives except his mom or dad. The parents decided to move from the plots to stay in the location (be)cause they are unable to work due to some circumstances. It might be age or illnesses. After a while his dad died. Mom starts to panic and tries to find a job. No luck. Starts picking food (unwanted) from green market to feed the kids. Because of hunger she finds herself a man to stay with in her shack in order to help with food and clothing for the kids. The mother dies after some few months and the child is left with the mother's boyfriend. He starts treating the boy badly, calling him names until everyone finds out and reports the problem to us. The child needs loving care and a warm family who can look after him and give him shelter to stay. (Rudolph, 2005, p. 29)

This is not an uncommon story uncommon story of a young child without secure family or community relationships. To help him know where and with whom he belongs, raises some questions in relation to the framing of belonging connected to family and community that is present in the NCF document, such as: What values, traditions and beliefs have been handed down to this child? Where and with whom does he belong? How can he make sense of himself and how can his belonging be supported in an ECD settings? Unfortunately, the NCF is silent on this matter.

Constance, a research participant from a remote rural community in South Africa, offers a different perspective:

> I was never viewed as an outsider in my relatives' homes. My culture has no cousins, aunts and uncles. We have brothers, sisters, older and younger mothers and fathers. The 'extended' family, in its modern western sense, did not exist. Everyone was part of our large family. Neighbours who were not direct relatives always had their families traced through totems and marriages until they became related to everyone else. So all villagers were one large family where individuals were expected to work for the common good. (Keane et al., 2016, p. 6)

This view of identity that emerges from ubuntu and relatedness can be extended also beyond the village, beyond only humans, to include the natural and spirit world. Relatedness offers an inclusive way of knowing, being and belonging that does not constrain identity in terms of any particular group that automatically makes those not in 'my' group 'different' and 'other', a view that dominates the NCF at present.

Intersectionality: Class in the 'rainbow nation'

I also wish to signal the importance of the intersections of race, class and culture in understanding how children belong in diverse South African contexts. The NCF does not take account of class and its complex relations with race, religion and spirit in the South African context. While I have to leave this important discussion for others, because of the limited space in this article, let me discuss one example. The 'rainbow nation', a particularly important construction was drawn by its proponents from the traditional notion of 'ubuntu' and came to represent the ideal non-racial identity after 1994 (Goldberg, 2009). This notion, however, has subsequently been undermined by post-apartheid neo-liberal influences.

As children prepare for Grade R, the NCF suggests activities that help children "experience their cultural beliefs and religion in a positive way"… "talk about who is like them and who is different" … and "learn about race, gender, abilities" through an anti-bias approach (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 40). The example of an activity provided in the NCF for children 'to learn about difference' suggests acknowledging and celebrating events, such as "birthdays, Christmas, Diwali, Eid, Ramadan, Rosh Hashanah, Easter" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 40). The selection of these events reflects Wole Soyinka's position that African peoples and

their indigenous religious experiences have been rendered invisible by imperial religions (Soyinka, 2012). There is no mention in the NCF of ancestor rituals, funerals (in which young children participate), initiation or rain ceremonies, nor to collaborative work parties, known as 'Letsema' (Sotho) or 'iLima' (isiZulu) to get big communal jobs done through volunteering labour, usually accompanied by a celebration.

The NCF is less mindful if at all to include children in 'informal' and 'traditional' dwellings. Instead, the knowledge base it references, the pedagogies it suggests and the examples it offers are biased towards urban contexts, middle-class neighbourhoods, and the western myth of nuclear family. It would seem that in the interest of equity, the bias should be in the other direction. The NCF abridged version states that, "it is important to build a society that pays attention to equity and diversity and respects indigenous African experiences"(Department of Basic Education, 2015b, p. 2). The NCF prescribes 'respecting' the existence of other forms of belonging and experiences and using those "to promote socially, culturally and linguistically sensitive learning environments" (Department of Basic Education, 2015a, p. 66). Respecting and being sensitive to these knowledges and forms of belonging, however, fall far short of considering what those mean for diverse identities and forms of belonging for young children, and the inclusion of place and spiritually based pedagogies in South African ECD. This suggests that the mobilization of the notions of local and indigenous knowledges are utilised to 'add-on' to the dominant western view of knowledge and learning without the need to address the fundamental issues of commensurability and hierarchies of knowledge that silence indigenous perspectives and ways of being prevalent in different communities.

Conclusion

With my analysis of the NCF, I argue that the way the 'problem' is identified in the national policy support for ECD in South Africa ironically undermines its intention to reduce poverty and promote equity. In the absence of debate about the purpose of education and the kind of society we want, positioning ECD as a strategy for improving taken-for-granted 'evidence based' education outcomes subscribes to a western and middle-class view of childhood and society. Drawing on autobiographic stories, I have pointed to the wide diversity in the experiences of children in South Africa in terms of the complex relations of space, race, class and culture, and flagged the urban middle-class bias of the NCF. I have contrasted the NCF construction of 'identity' and 'belonging' with another view based on an African holistic and

inclusive notion of 'relatedness' that extends beyond the material world into the spirit world. I have flagged some of the taken-for-granted 'truths' that normalise one image of childhood and society leaving many children and their families invisible, unacknowledged and unappreciated, thus marginalising them further. My argument does not seek to judge or privilege one knowledge or world-view, but rather aims to create spaces for alternative world-views by uncovering silences and highlighting the implicit hierarchy of knowledge in the NCF that claims to create an equal, just and 'convivial society' set out in the 1955 Freedom Charter.

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