South African Journal of Childhood Education
ISSN: (Online) 2223-7682, (Print) 2223-7674

Interrogating the epistemic dimension for new beginnings in early childhood care and education

Author:
Hasina B. Ebrahim[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Hasina Ebrahim,
ebrahhb@unisa.ac.za

Dates:
Received: 12 Feb. 2024
Accepted: 10 May 2024
Published: 21 Aug. 2024

How to cite this article:
Ebrahim, H.B., 2024, 'Interrogating the epistemic dimension for new beginnings in early childhood care and education', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14(1), a1532. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v14i1.1532

Background: Currently, the globe is at the crossroads of a polycrisis where multiple shocks and interdependencies play out in an ever-evolving integrated world. Young children and their families bear the brunt of these realities through stresses that have a negative impact on them. In seeking better worlds in early childhood care and education (ECCE), it is imperative that universalised quick-fix solutions that sideline multiple perspectives and multivocality do not become the norm.

Aim: This conceptual article aims to interrogate the epistemic dimension in ECCE by analysing resistance to dominant framings and possibilities for new beginnings.

Methods: Specific concepts from decolonial literature are unpacked and operationalised through a collective case study. Cases were purposively selected for their pushback elements from literature and the author's experiences. The cases from the United States of America, Africa and South Africa were analysed for patterns of resistance and possibilities.

Results: The findings reveal that the resistance efforts from different geographical regions emanate from intentional actions to contest dominant perspectives in ECCE, and to reorient the epistemological space with affirming alternatives. As a collective, the case studies can be read as relational experiences that resist elimination and assimilation into universalised framings of ECCE.

Conclusion: The focus on the epistemic dimension from different geographical spaces, and more importantly from similar relational experiences, points to the importance of expanding a network of solidarity for a more inclusive ECCE science.

Contribution: This study contributes to filling the gap in knowledge in ECCE through a focus on how the epistemic dimension has the potential to be skewed in the current polycrisis unless concerted action is undertaken to develop polycentres that include multiple ways of knowing, thinking and feeling in ECCE.

Keywords: early childhood care and education; polycrisis; epistemic dimension; decolonisation; collective case study; networks of solidarity.

Introduction

The interrogation of the epistemic dimension of early childhood care and education (ECCE) is still emerging. There needs to be ongoing debates related to the politics of knowledge, dominant framings and resultant ambivalences for serving young children and their families in rapidly transforming societies; hence, there is a need for a study of this nature. When the epistemic dimension is the focus of a study, it becomes imperative to examine the following: the nature of knowledge, the reasoning and justifications for what is considered to be authentic ways of knowing for a variety of purposes.

According to Meghji (2023:295), sectors continue to deal with contestations embedded within an 'imperial episteme' – a mode of thinking and expression of power that erects hierarchies between 'us' (metropoles of colonisers) and 'them' (the colonised in the peripheries). In ECCE, these hierarchies become apparent in the scientific evidence of Euro-American origin that is uncritically generalised and presented as the only valid way of knowing ECCE (Cannella 1997; Viruru 2001; Penn 2005). Consequently, there are collisions with local knowledges and practices that create inaccuracies, tensions and dilemmas. Ripples of dissent emerge when top-down solutions use reductionist understandings that have little to do with frontline realities. The global ECCE agendas normally find expression in low- and middle-income countries through policies and

Note: Special Collection: Interrogating Coloniality in South African Primary Schools.

implementation roll-outs that are disconnected from the concrete experiences of young children and their families in the local context (Okwany & Ebrahim 2018). In line with this revelation, the aim of this article is therefore to interrogate the epistemic dimension of ECCE for new beginnings amid high volatility and rapid change.

There are several justifications for exposing the current epistemic dimension of ECCE. Since 2020, the world has experienced unprecedented changes brought about by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, global warming, wars, emergencies and rapid technological innovations. These developments create realities resulting in a polycrisis defined as 'the presence of multiple near-simultaneous shocks, with strong interdependencies among them, taking place in an ever-more integrated world' (UNICEF 2023:6). In ECCE, polycrisis means that existing and new vulnerabilities will continue to impact negatively on young children's wellbeing, growth, development and learning. Because the realities that comprise the polycrisis are integrated, they are difficult to address and can result in high instability and breakdown of already fragile ECCE systems, especially in low- and middle-income countries. For example, in Kenya, during COVID-19, Marangu et al. (2022:97) noted that 'at risk' children in pre-pandemic times became more vulnerable as levels of risk intensified. Their study showed that an ill-designed system with little concern for protective factors and structural inequalities impacted negatively on children's engagement and caregiver involvement in urban settlements in Kenya. In the similarities of experiences of the polycrisis across the globe and the quest for expeditious solutions, it is imperative to avoid universal and homogenised quick fixes that sideline lived experiences and local knowledge.

Further, uniform practices premised on specific path dependencies of global development are not feasible in low- and middle-income countries given the structural transformations needed in different regional and local contexts to deal with elements of a polycrisis. Over time, it is clear that the celebratory turn to globalisation has not resulted in the full appreciation of exchanges of ideas and high respect for cultural hybridity (Bhambra 2014). In ECCE, attempts to reinforce the analytical tropes of 'global' and 'childhood' remain problematic (Ebrahim 2012). In this regard, the work of scholars engaged in 'border-crossing' and critical work must continue to advance social epistemologies, including those in ECCE. This trajectory is imperative, taking into account the alert raised by Mitova (2023) on efforts to derail the project of epistemological decolonisation in the social sciences. This project has been viewed as inward-looking and not really contributing to the global knowledge space. Mitova (2022) contends that those who use this argument ignore the implications of the decolonisation process. The latter involves re-centring the knowledge enterprise to specific geo-political locations to restore its epistemic authority. This should be enabled through listening to multiple voices for perspective-building.

The re-orienting noted by Mitova (2022) is valuable for ECCE in that it allows for the unique features of context and marginalised perspectives to be visible. This has the potential for destabilising notions of best practices and embarking on the development of a polycentre that values local knowledge and practices. It must be remembered that epistemological re-orienting goes beyond the physical geographical areas of former colonies. Of importance are the relational experiences that connect individuals and groups on the level of epistemological marginalisation and realities of inequalities. There is a gap in the exploration of the epistemic dimension in ECCE from both geographical and relational perspectives for dealing with the circumstances precipitated by rapid radical change.

Bearing in mind the ideas presented thusfar this article aims to interrogate the epistemic dimension of ECCE to chart a new trajectory for action. To do this, related concepts of resistance that inform the epistemic dimension are used through a collection of cases that reveal actions to attain epistemic relevance in specific contexts. The concepts of epistemic disobedience from a minority world context (United States of America – USA), epistemic decolonisation from Africa and epistemic exclusion as a pushback in South Africa are discussed to demonstrate contextual activism for epistemic change. The multilevel exposition emphasises the importance of relational agency for knowledge generation from the margins. This article explains that these efforts are not without challenges. Hence, high intentionality is imperative to promote greater cohesive action for epistemic change.

Unpacking concepts in the epistemic dimension

Analysing the epistemic dimension in ECCE is complex as it requires the selection of several concepts for engagement and change. At the outset, it was important to understand epistemicide in relation to realities in ECCE. The concept refers to the death of knowledge of people from 'subordinate' cultures, the dispossession of people from the ownership of their ideas and the devaluing of knowledge systems of those on the periphery (De Sousa Santos 2014; Hall & Tandon 2017). Grosfoguel (2013:74) reiterates that epistemicide is about 'the extermination of knowledge and ways of knowing'. This epistemicide is an active process that creates injustices that are operationalised through structured and systemic oppression with the goal of silencing alternatives to dominant ways of knowing. The system of apartheid in South Africa is an example of epistemicide in action. The dominant group ignored local child development knowledge and practices of black South Africans to engineer separate and unequal childhoods (Ebrahim 2010). The discussion that follows is about three resistance concepts that speak to the monopolies of knowledge that have distorted realities in ECCE. The concepts of epistemic disobedience, epistemic decolonisation and epistemic injustice all show a pushback to dominant ways of knowing.

The concept of epistemic (dis)obedience can be attributed to the work of Mignolo (2009) who engages with a transgressive

stance in order to exercise decolonial freedom. In the quest to make marginalised positions matter and to reshape ways of knowing and doing through sub-alternated positions, intentional pushback is required (Connell 2007; Mignolo 2000). Epistemic disobedience is then a response to epistemicide and dominance of knowing a field such as ECCE through hegemonic knowledge of Euro-American origin. Meghji (2023) views epistemic disobedience as repelling hegemonic knowledge to thinking from and between other ways of knowing. Those in subjugated positions benefit from epistemic disobedience as their thoughts and voices are raised. Such efforts emerge from contesting zero-point perspectives that encourage a semblance of naturalised truths that are unproblematic. The act of epistemic disobedience includes oppositional defiance and revolutionary actions. The active resistance is radical and disruptive as opposed to a business-as-usual approach. The disobedience epistemically runs the risk of being shut down by hegemonic forces. For example, in ECCE, when marginalised perspectives relating to culture are exposed, they are regarded as adaptations to a mainstream narrative that keeps essential foundations in place so that the baby is not thrown out with the bath (Burman 2001).

Epistemic decolonisation is another influential concept used in this study. It is best understood through examining each concept separately, and then making sense of the rest. Decoloniality, contends Jimoh (2022), is an effort to destabilise Euro-American conceptions that make Western rationalities and paradigms appear universal, and as the only trustworthy framework to think about and to analyse particular phenomena such as ECCE. When decoloniality is in action, there are two methodological procedures: there is the phase of delinking the phenomena from universalised framings, which then makes room for perspective building through focussing on what has been silenced and marginalised. The dismantling of the dominant narrative about a phenomenon focusses on epistemic standpoints. The emphasis on colonialism makes salient the pattern of global power where hierarchies are created through (Western) domination that makes certain geographical places, people and knowledge inferior (Mitova 2022).

When the epistemic dimension of decoloniality is privileged, then the focus is specifically on decolonisation of knowledge (Jimoh 2022). This entails identifying the centrality of Western epistemologies and illuminating knowledge at the margins, for example, indigenous knowledge on young children and early childhood in Africa (Nsameneng 2008). This pushback contests notions of indigenous knowledge as superstition and illegitimate. The low status of non-western knowledge results from hierarchies that are constructed to reveal specific ways of knowing as the default for thought and action in particular sectors such as ECCE (Okwany & Ebrahim 2018). Epistemic decolonisation is the gateway to alternate ways of knowing, doing, thinking and feeling. It allows for dialogue, learning exchanges and epistemic inquiry to occur. There is sensitivity to a generative approach to bring marginalised knowledge to the fore.

The discussion above suggests the need for justice. Epistemic injustice focusses on the status of the knower. Fricker (2007) chastises epistemic injustices that sideline an individual's capacity as the knower through the concepts of testimonial and hermeneutic injustices. When there are testimonial injustices, then the speaker is given less attention because there is bias about the identity of the speaker. This is conspicuous in ECCE as it relates to young children whose voices are viewed as less credible because of dominant discourses normally used by adults and teachers. Hermeneutical injustice is more about the structural aspects where an individual may be lacking the epistemic resources that enable the sharing of experiences with others. In ECCE, this is often seen when teachers who have linguistic capital in African languages are trained in English and expected to share their learning using the dominant language of learning and teaching.

Both concepts posed by Fricker (2007) exhibit the oppressive dynamics that raise issues for engagement and action when dealing with diversity. Woods, Mackenzie and Wong (2013) call for recognitive justice which applies to ECCE. This posture, they assert, is about recognition where languages, values and cultural experiences from a variety of backgrounds are made visible. For Fraser (2003:7), the goal of recognitive justice is to create a 'difference-friendly world' where the maintenance of normative roles and ways of creating space for diversity to flourish.

In this article, the concepts discussed demonstrate attempts at dismantling hegemonic conceptions of knowledge and relations of power in ECCE. The displacing of the dominant rationalities and paradigms for actions accentuates silences and epistemic standpoints that gravitate towards culturally diverse epistemologies.

Research methods and design

In the study, there was a need for analysis of key examples where resistances to dominant conceptions of ECCE were illustrated. This pointed to the use of case studies which have been variously defined, but definitions mainly centre on examining a case in a bounded system (Johnson & Christensen 2008). When one examines a system, it is also important to look at its interrelated parts. Hence, the reference to boundedness allows a researcher to examine one part of a study (Johnson & Christensen 2008, 2012). In this article, the case is the phenomenon of resistance that emerged from constituencies of scholars at three different geographical locations: the United States of America, Africa and South Africa. When the resistance narratives are read together, they allow for an understanding of how scholar-activists collaborated to push the narrow boundaries of knowledge to bring alternatives to the fore. The cases were selected taking into consideration the diversity of the geographical regions, the exploration of unconventional ideas in context, as well as the author's expertise and experience in the field.

The analysis of a number of cases in this study is best described as a collective case study. The latter is about the

examination of multiple cases in an attempt to understand a particular issue (Crowe et al. 2011). The cases for interrogation were selected based on literature and the author's engagement with issues in a variety of exercises related to, but not limited to the expansion of the epistemic dimension in ECCE. The analysis proceeded by examining each case in a conceptual space to identify the resistance for epistemic change. As a collective of cases, it was then easy to identify the patterns of resistance, challenges and pathways for forward movement. By approaching the analysis in this way, the provision of fresh perspectives for new beginnings regarding ECCE emerged.

Collective case studies of resistance

The three cases in the collective case study provide snapshots of resistance to shape new contours for ECCE. Each case uses contextual concerns to advocate for change. The concepts informing the epistemic dimension are used to bring alive the resistance. The inclusion of the USA as a minority world and/or rich country perspective among the African and South African perspectives is significant to showcase the solidarity in resistance – a stance that needs to be further developed.

Case 1: Epistemic disobedience from USA (minority world)

Epistemic disobedience as resistance to dominant knowledge systems in ECCE is visible through transgressive action by specific movements. One of the significant pushback efforts that continue to challenge universal standardised responses to ECCE and engagement with diversity, can be traced to the reconceptualist movement. In the 1980s, scholars mainly from the minority world raised concerns about the disciplinary dominance of psychology and child development theory in ECCE (Cannella 1997; Kessler & Swadener 1992). To break down narrow practices and the disciplinary stronghold in ECCE, the reconceptualist scholars used critical, feminist, postcolonial and postmodern perspectives in ECCE to expose the limitations of universal prescriptions couched as best practice.

The contribution of the reconceptualists from a wider epistemological base opened up critiques and new avenues to engage with knowledge at peripheries through delinking exercises. For example, Genishi and Dyson (2009:4) raised alarm bells on the 'puzzling contrast' and the disconnect between the diversity and the 'uniformity, homogenisation and regimentation of practices' in pre-kindergarten classes in the USA. They also exposed how the dominant discourse of child development ignores situated knowledge as it privileges the decontexualised domains of child development (physical, social, emotional and cognitive). These domains were indiscriminately used and continue to shape developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) (Soto & Swadener 2002). Where universal framings are strong, child development domains are separately measured to make sense of young children's development. In this context, questions were raised on reductionist benchmarks as a worthwhile goal for early education given the complexities of children's daily realities (Genishi & Dyson 2012).

To accentuate diversity and complexity, reconceptualists have shown how categories of difference (age, race, class and gender) in different contexts intersect to create complex lived experiences for children, their teachers and non-traditional families (Grieshaber & Cannella 2001). For example, Viruru (2001) used postcolonial perspectives in India to show how Western discourses of play-based learning, child-centred education and notions of the becoming child were impractical to understand preschool education in India. The multiple worlds of the Indian context called for respectful meaning-making with children as beings who had a sense of belonging in the settings they occupied and the places they called their lifeworld. This rich experience of preschool education would have most likely been ignored in DAP. Cannella (1997) criticises how the imperialist notions that produce powerful ideologies are used to justify the categorisation of children, while those from non-western cultures are viewed as being backward and in need of rescue from those in rich countries.

Over time, the reconceptualist as an academic organisation through conferences, publications and learning exchanges with others interested in dealing with difference, has built up critical perspectives in ECCE beyond the USA. They have introduced different theories, qualitative research methodologies and ways of communicating findings that have traditionally not been within the ECCE space (Bloch & Swadener 2023). They recognise that in current times we are dealing with global inequalities, wars and other realities that need their continuing efforts as critical scholars who use different approaches to activism. They offer to agitate for future action in ECCE. Ritchie (2023) points to investing in the value of learning how to be unknown by provoking us to think about what is unknown, what else can be unknown and what the pathways towards deeds are – and not words. This signals the importance of engaging with the unknown and possibly invoking disobedience to chart new actions. Bloch (2023) urges reconceptualists in ECCE to strongly position themselves as advocates for change. She notes that while critical scholarship has made a difference in the field of early childhood education, it is inadequate to deal with global inequities. She provokes reconceptualists to think about forming powerful alliances for greater mass action for change. All of the proposals detailed point to the importance of being vigilant of policies and programmes that impose regimes of 'truth' and thereby create exclusions and inequalities. The focus should be on social justice, personal liberation and emancipatory practices. Given the diversity, complexity and need for inclusive practices, the uniting of different types of stakeholders such as children, practitioners, families, policymakers, academics and researchers is imperative for change.

Case 2: Epistemic decolonisation efforts in Africa

In Africa, epistemic decolonisation displays an engagement with the realities of the colonial experience and efforts for epistemological re-orientation. The epistemic colonisation is

explained by Nwosimiri (2022) who reiterates that the colonial experiences in Africa led to forceful impositions of Western education and knowledge systems. In this context and over time, indigenous African knowledge systems, cultures and traditions were regarded as being inferior. This can be understood in the context of Western knowledge being accepted as the standard by which other knowledge systems were judged. A prime example is the under-representation of research from Africa. In 2008, Jeffrey Arnett (2008) noted that out of 2531 articles reviewed from six American Psychological Association Journals, 0% of primary authors were from Africa. In updated research in 2021, Arnett and colleagues noted that less than 1% of the primary authorship was from Africa (Thalmayer, Toscanelli & Arnett 2021). This state of affairs exists because of the bulk of the research being conducted by Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) researchers (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan 2010). In this context, Pence (2023a) maintains that WEIRD researchers should make space for 'outsiders' to tell their stories in their own ways, rather than to be their own voice. In this way, the global audience would benefit from less heard voices instead of only those who are privileged to exercise power in the knowledge generation space. African researchers, however, have not waited for the licence to act from the dominant players in the ECCE knowledge generation enterprise.

Epistemic decolonisation in ECCE has developed through pockets of efforts to produce local knowledge that speaks to ways of knowing and being in African contexts. A reactive approach was used against global knowledge to make alternatives more visible. Makokoro (2023) elaborates that the 1990s was an important time for key developments to institutionalise ECCE in Africa through international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children (ACRWC) was born out of concerns related to children's rights in the African context. Makokoro (2023) adds that the leaders in the then Organisation for African Unity (OAU) (currently the African Union) contested the articles in the CRC. Instead of ratifying the CRC, the leaders at the time recognised its philosophical bias, its relevance for children's rights and parenting in the African context. Hence, they were able to map their own path through the ACRWC but not without challenges in ratification and implementation. Another reactive response in the 1990s was the formation of the Consultative Group for ECD for knowledge generation and advocacy. This group embarked on knowledge generation for building the indigenous knowledge base to inform policy and programming (Makokoro 2023). The Working Group in ECD (WGECD) also facilitated research, capacity-building and knowledge exchanges.

From the 2000s, more concentrated work in ECCE continued through conferences leading to publications. For example, The Accra 2005 Conference led to the publication *Africa's Future, Africa's Challenge* which was shared at an ECCE Conference in Senegal in 2009. The volume could be read as attempts to 'decentre' hegemonic Western knowledge systems in favour of Africentric perspectives – a delinking effort for epistemological re-orienting. Of note is the chapter by Nsameneng (2008) with the provocative title *(Mis) Understanding ECD in Africa: Forces of local and global motives*. The author deconstructs dominance in ECCE and reconstructs it using African experiences by adopting a critical stance to received wisdom which minimises the chances of developing culturally sensitive approaches to programming and policies in Africa. He offers indigenous perspectives of personhood and developmental learning to contest the idea that all children can learn a universal culture. Other efforts went beyond advocacy for Africentric narratives. Okwany and Ebrahim (2016:432) interpret epistemic decolonisation in ECCE as not only the 'decentring of universals' but also 'recognition of a multi-polar world'. In this world, they assert that we need multiple voices and plurality of spaces inclusive of Eurocentric and Africentric narratives. Hence, in this perspective of epistemic decolonisation, ECCE researchers beyond the African borders should unite and raise awareness of marginalised knowledge and its potential for contributing to contextually responsive ECCE.

Additionally, there have been capacity-building efforts in ECCE with a view to develop scholars grounded in African realities and perspectives from outside and within Africa (Ejuu 2023). One of the key initiatives launched in 2000 was the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU) coordinated by the University of Victoria (Pence 2007). During the time of offering, the programme helped build the capacity of ECCE leaders, facilitated learning exchanges and invited knowledge generation (Pence & Marfo 2004). An evaluation of 68 of the graduates from the ECDVU programme (Pence & Vargas-Baron 2023) revealed that Africa received a brain gain. The programme helped in retaining the graduates while enabling them to contribute to advancing ECCE. Within Africa, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria) located in Dakar (Senegal) is active in promoting multidisciplinary research and offers opportunities to grow early-career researchers. In 2015, the Codesria Child and Youth Institute was dedicated to a focus on birth-to-three in the African context. Fifteen emerging scholars representing south, east, west and central Africa participated in the workings of the institute. The gathering resulted in an edited book titled *Early Childhood Care and Education at the Margins: African: Perspectives on Birth to Three* (eds. Ebrahim, Okwany & Barry 2018). The African Early Childhood Network (AfECN) based in Nairobi, hosted fellowship programmes and workshops for ECCE scholars. They are also the home of the Knowledge Working Group for ECD driving the African Union agenda for the CESA (16–25). This grouping enables ECCE research and interventions in policy, governance, inclusion, access and quality. There are also regional conferences held in different geographical regions in Africa where knowledge exchanges occur, for example, the Southern and Eastern African Conference in Zambia in 2023 and the East African Conference in Dar-es-Salaam in 2024.

From the above discussion, it is apparent that there have been promising initiatives that created opportunities for epistemic decolonisation. The project itself in Africa is not merely an event. Mbembe (2015:15) urges us to view our involvement with a continuity eye that makes salient 'an ongoing process of seeing ourselves clearly' in the spaces we enter. Ejuu (2023) reminds us that the globe is becoming more multicultural – African scholars would have to adopt complex postures – working intentionally to build multiple centres and being vigilant of bias (related inferiorisation of places, persons, knowledges and subjectivities). These postures are necessary to ensure that perspectives from African realities and local knowledges are prioritised to inform polycentric circles that offer multiple perspectives for ECCE activism.

Case 3: Epistemic injustice and pushback in South Africa

In the examination of epistemic injustice in South Africa, ECCE has not received due attention. The literature focusses on curriculum, schooling and higher education. Set in context, the quest for epistemic justice in ECCE can be traced to colonisation and apartheid in South Africa. Epistemic injustice manifests when individuals are treated unjustly or have experiences of exclusion based on their race, gender or socio-economic status (Omodan 2023). These categories of difference are then used to devalue the knowledge and perspectives of those at the periphery. Fricker (2007) notes that epistemic injustice harms the knower because of prejudice and stereotyping that inform who they are, and what they are capable of. She adds how knowers experience harm because of a credibility deficit and lack of support structurally to enable them to share their knowledge.

In apartheid South Africa, the hegemonic epistemic position is gleaned from the way in which white superiority and privilege created unequal early childhoods based on racial divisions and resultant oppressive dynamics (Ebrahim 2010). As knowers of 'good' early childhood education, white South Africans created structures such as pre-primary education for school readiness and an early headstart to build social superiority using white middle-class norms. The South African Nursery Association was the knowledge arm that provided the epistemic leverages for shaping early education (Department of Education 2001). Knowledge of Western child-centred practices based on Froebelian ideas and Montessori practices were also used to shape best practices for white children. Child-centred ideas, however, were not without tension. They clashed with ideas of pre-primary school readiness programmes promoted by the then Department of Education for white children (National Education Policy Investigation – NEPI 1992). Hence, within the privileged sector, there were variations in knowledge for practice elements. Overall, the hegemonic epistemic position of educating young children in the apartheid past demonstrates how a dominant group chose its epistemic practices and developed institutions such as pre-primary schools to guide the early socialisation and upward mobility for children of a specific race. Young children's education for the majority of South Africans was left to families (Ebrahim 2006). The cultural knowledge in this domain and its intersections with race were placed under erasure – it was there, but not valued as capital for serious attention. Black parents as knowers were viewed in deficit and their capital was devalued. Therefore, limited compensatory education was set up for school readiness. In the broader apartheid project, it was there to ensure that black South Africans fulfilled the need for cheap labour. An example of compensatory education (imported from American Intelligence Quotient Research Units) into the South African Indian education department was the Bridging Module Readiness Classes (BMRC). Preschool children were given two hours of school readiness before they entered Grade 1 (NEPI 1992). From the author's experience, these classes focussed heavily on perceptual development activities developed by white educational psychologists. Assumptions were common that parents were illiterate about how to support early learning, and the gap would compromise the skills needed for a society engineered by race and other oppressive dynamics.

The advent of democracy, and the quest for solutions to develop early childhood education, led South Africa to discover principles and practices that reflected 'broader global thinking within progressive frameworks of intervention and practice' (Department of Education 2001:13). This signals the lack of confidence at the time for drawing on participatory approaches for local knowledges to inform policy development. In reconstructing the early years, greater faith was placed in universalised concepts of early childhood development (ECD). The field of ECD assumed a definition that concurs with the universalised notions of domains of child development as a default organiser for guidance and action. Despite this, there was recognition that white middle-class provision was unjust and that ECD should be premised on a foundation of democracy and equality (Department of Education 2001). There was a call for building values that would counter the prejudices and discrimination endemic to South Africa. Thus, ECD was viewed as a vehicle for equitable multiculturalism (Department of Education 2001).

The dismantling of epistemic hegemony for ECCE remains a fragile attempt in South Africa, but there have been some promising developments. Compared to the rest of Africa, Pence and Aston (2016) note that most of the research for ECCE comes from South Africa. The knowledge generation initiatives can be attributed to research activities by non-governmental organisations and universities. The formation of research organisations such as the South African Research Association for Early Childhood Education (SARAECE) has also led to a greater focus on ECCE knowledge generation. This organisation was launched in 2011 by a group of early childhood researchers and the Department of Higher Education. The *South African Journal of Childhood Education* is attached to the association – early childhood features as a sub-sector within the broad childhood domain. The knowledge generation does not necessarily mean that there

is growth in perspectives that lead to epistemic justice; the impact of the research has yet to fully emerge.

The work of individual researchers grounded in critical perspectives reveals some development to invite debate and influence policies through knowledge at the margins. For example, the work of the author of this article has led to influencing policy: raising alerts on early childhood is not only a phase of human development, but also a social construction that engenders the agency of young children, and highlights tensions in using global childhood templates. Foregrounding silences in curriculum and paying attention to situated knowledge are some of the boundary-crossing work for epistemic re-orientation (Ebrahim 2006, 2011, 2012; eds. Ebrahim & Chikoko 2022). These efforts have been influencing policy and practice, as well as exposing structures for multiple knowers to be participants in shaping ECCE. For example, the National Curriculum Framework urges teachers to work with young children as agents in reflective and intentional ways. This is reinforced in a scholarly text that drives a thinking teacher paradigm to deal with complexities and inequities in ECCE (Ebrahim et al. 2022).

Policymaking for ECCE in South Africa is also more participatory. For example, multivocality through the participation of different stakeholders was used as a tool to develop the Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading Up to Qualifications for ECD Educators (Department of Higher Education 2017). Currently, the author is leading a team using research to inform the Human Resource Strategy for ECD. In this project, the quest for situated knowledges is currently resulting in platforms of participation specifically directed at hearing the voices from the early childhood sector. These efforts attest to the importance of valuing knowers and opening up spaces for frontline practitioners and others to position themselves as knowing and speaking subjects (Okwany & Ebrahim 2016). These empowerment efforts are not without challenges.

There is also work being conducted by using indigenous concepts for application in ECCE. Instead of a flat reference to working together, ECCE researchers have shown the relevance of the solidarity of humans through interconnections as espoused in the concept of ubuntu. Padayachee et al. (2023) raise concerns about the colonisation of knowledge which excludes socio-cultural knowledge and indigenous practices involved in shaping young children's identities. To influence the early socialisation and education spaces through the use of indigenous knowledges, the strengthening of the prosocial values embedded in ubuntu was proposed. The authors assert that the interconnections forged through ubuntu principles have the potential to influence the development of citizens who prioritise co-existence. This is important as South African society is riddled with realities that hinder democratic practices. The concept of ubuntu is viewed as an important framing for ECCE teacher-development. Solis et al. (2019) advanced an understanding of play-based learning in South Africa using ubuntu principles and showing its application to encourage enjoyment, curiosity and ownership.

As noted previously, working with marginalisations for epistemic justice is a process, and not an event. There are yet to be significant national group coalitions positioned as agents of change working seriously with the epistemic dimension in ECCE. Currently, there are a few qualitative studies with no serious funding to move the agenda for epistemic justice forward. This means that the indiscriminate borrowing from 'what works' literature which is shaped by rich country priorities and ways of knowing, continues to complicate decisions made for ECCE policy and practice. Attempts to enable multiple voices in the local context need to be valued for what they present and to be influential in shaping directions for action and not merely used for confirmation of proposals for directions. Tobi (2022) talks about a fair-minded pursuit of knowledge where agents pay careful attention to being epistemically loyal and just in epistemic endeavours. He cautions against furthering 'pernicious' (Tobi 2022:342) political agendas and social considerations. A fair-minded pursuit is needed in ECCE research in South Africa to avoid the barriers of epistemic injustice.

Conclusion

Towards new beginnings

The analysis of each of the case studies adds perspectives from different geographical regions on efforts to resist dominant epistemological framings that limit ways of knowing and being. As a collective of relational experiences, the case studies reveal efforts to repel assimilation and to direct energies towards a more just ECCE. The focus on the epistemic dimension of ECCE reveals a multi-level network of solidarity (Medina & Spector 2021) that can develop further to advance epistemic pluralism in ECCE for research, policy and practice. Such work requires being comfortable with the uncertainty of not knowing everything in advance, viewing diversity as a strength, engaging with lived experiences and creating participatory platforms for knowledge building. Theorising, understanding and writing from subjugated positionalities are difficult but necessary for sustainable futures and generative encounters.

Given that the above is a challenge and requires intentional effort, it must include scholars from globe-inclusive regions – the global north and south. The polycrisis is a global phenomenon that needs us to view young children's lives through lenses that focus on their realities, so we need to include 'lost epistemes' to do so (Abebe & Biswas 2021:124). Working in solidarity and in tandem for serious change would provide greater knowledge for the development of our understanding of ECCE from the margins, rather than just from canonised epistemic centres. In all of this, co-production from a polycentre should serve as an enabling platform.

Further, open dialogue is important not only for knowledge generation but also for citations, circulations and structural challenges when working for transformative change. In enabling dialogue, the focus must be on relational positions of experiences, subordination and erasure instead of

essentialising the position of geography that might reinforce the 'us' and 'them' boundaries (Meghji 2023). Multiple centres of knowledge for action would encourage different perspectives on shocks and stress affecting young children and their families in polycrisis times. All of these ideas concur with Escobar's (2020) notion of pluriversalism where there is space for horizontal dialogues between individuals. The vertical hierarchies would promote addressing ECCE issues, seeing their merits and bringing standpoints to debate with one another, rather than dismissing them. Meghji (2023) highlights the importance of enacting epistemic humility to appreciate the value in what is being made knowable, and who is making it knowable. Further research needs to be conducted on pathway mapping to engender a more global engagement for an inclusive science and action in ECCE.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

Author's contributions

H.B.E. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Abebe, T. & Biswas, T., 2021, 'Rights in education: Outlines for a decolonial, childist reimagination of the future – commentary to Ansell and colleagues', *Fennia* 199(1), 118–128. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.107490

Arnett, J.J., 2008, 'The neglected 95%: Why American psychology needs to become less American', *The American Psychologist* 63(7), 602–614. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.7.602

Bhambra, G.K., 2014, 'Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues', *Postcolonial Studies* 17(2), 115–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966414

Bloch, M.N., 2023, 'Critical scholarship in early education and care: Writing and speaking for/with others', *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal* 10(1), 23–27.

Bloch, M.N. & Swadener, B.B., 2023, 'Introduction to the special issue: Critical reflections and provocations from reconceptualist "elders"', *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal* 10(1), 1–7.

Burman, E., 2001, 'Beyond the baby and the bathwater: Postdualistic developmental psychologies for diverse childhoods', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 9(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930185208651

Cannella, G.S., 1997, 'Deconstructing Early Childhood Education: Social Justice and Revolution', *Rethinking Childhood*, volume 2, pp. 25–36, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York, NY.

Connell, R., 2007, *Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science*, Routledge, London.

Crowe, S., Creswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A. & Sheik, A., 2011, 'The case study approach', *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 11, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-100

Department of Education (DoE), 2001, *The nationwide audit of ECD provisioning in South Africa*, Government Printers, Pretoria.

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2017, *Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators, Government Gazette No. 40750*, Government Printer, Pretoria.

De Sousa Santos, B., 2014, *Epistemologies of the south: Justice against epistemicide*, Paradigm Publishers, London.

Ebrahim, H.B., 2006, 'Constructions of childhood for and by children in two early childhood centres in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa', Doctoral thesis, University of Kwazulu-Natal.

Ebrahim, H., 2010, 'Tracing historical shifts in early care and education in South Africa', *Journal of Education* 48, 119–135.

Ebrahim, H., 2012, 'Tensions in incorporating global childhood with early childhood programs: The case of South Africa', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 37(3), 80–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911203700311

Ebrahim, H.B., 2011, 'Children as agents in early childhood education', *Education as Change* 15(1), 121–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2011.568947

Ebrahim, H.B. & Chikoko, V. (eds.), 2022, *Critical issues in professional development: Situated accounts from South Africa*, Unisa Press, Pretoria.

Ebrahim, H.B., Okwany, A. & Barry, O. (eds.), 2018, *Early childhood care and education at the margins: African perspectives on birth to three*, Routledge, London.

Ebrahim, H.B., Waniganayake, M., Hannaway, D. & Modise, M., 2022, *Curriculum, pedagogy, assessment. A handbook for Early Childhood Education*, Pearsons South Africa, Pretoria.

Ejuu, G., 2023, 'African ECD scholars – Challenges and prospects', in A. Pence, P. Makokoro, H.B. Ebrahim & O. Barry (eds.), *Sankofa: Appreciating the past in planning the future of early childhood education, care and development in Africa*, pp. 189–200, UNESCO, Paris.

Escobar, A., 2020, *Pluriversal politics: The real and the possible*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Fraser, N., 2003, 'Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition and participation', in N. Fraser & A. Honneth (eds.), *Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange*, pp. 7–109, Verso, New York, NY.

Fricker, M., 2007, *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Genishi, C. & Dyson, A.H., 2009, *Children, language, and literacy: Diverse learners in diverse times*, Teachers College Press, New York, NY.

Genishi, C. & Dyson, A.H., 2012, 'Racing to the Top: Who's Accounting for the Children?', *Occasional Paper Series* (27), 18–20. https://doi.org/10.58295/2375-3668.1067

Grieshaber, S. & Cannella, G. S., (Eds.) 2001, 'From identity to identities: Increasing possibilities for Early Childhood Education', in *Embracing identities in early childhood education: Diversity and possibilities*, pp. 3–23, Teacher College Press, New York, NY.

Jimoh, A.K., 2022, 'Decoloniality, epistemological decolonization and African knowledge practices', *A Philosophico -Theological Journal* 12, 77–96.

Johnson, B. & Christensen, L., 2008, *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative and mixed approaches*, 3rd edn., Sage, Los Angles, CA.

Johnson, B. & Christensen, L., 2012, *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative and mixed approaches*, 4th edn., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Hall, B.L. & Tandon, R., 2017, 'Decolonization of knowledge, epistemicide, participatory research and higher education', *Research for All* 1(1), 6–19. https://doi.org/10.18546/RFA.01.1.02

Henrich, J., Heine, S.J. & Norenzayan, A., 2010, 'The weirdest people in the world?', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33(2–3), 61–83. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X

Kessler, S. & Swadener, B.B. (eds.), 1992, *Reconceptualizing the early childhood curriculum: Beginning the dialogue*, Teachers College Press, New York, NY.

Makokoro, P., 2023, 'Sankofa reflections on the 1990s', in A. Pence, P. Makokoro, H.B. Ebrahim & O. Barry (eds.), *Sankofa: Appreciating the past in planning the future of early childhood education, care and development in Africa*, pp. 99–110, UNESCO, Paris.

Marangu, J., Angwenyi, V., Mabrouk, A., Too, E., Kabue, M. & Abubakar, A., 2022, 'Predictors for caregiver involvement in childcare, education, and early learning in Kenyan urban informal settlements during COVID-19', in *Early Childhood Education and care in a global pandemic*, pp. 83–101, Routledge, London.

Mbembe, A., 2015, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*, viewed 18 January 2024, from https://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf.

Medina, D.A. & Spector, A.Y., 2021, 'Class politics, crisis, and opportunity: A call for solidarity', *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* 12, 1–18.

Meghji, A., 2023, 'Dwelling in epistemic disobedience: A reply to Go', *The British Journal of Sociology* 74(3), 294–301. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12987

Mitova, V., 2023, 'Why Epistemic Decolonisation in Africa?', *Social Epistemology* 37(6), 739–752.

National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), 1992, *Early childhood educare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Nsamenang, A.B., 2008, '(Mis)understanding ECD in Africa: The force of local and global motives', in M. Garcia, A. Pence & J. Evans (eds.), *Africa's future, Africa's challenge*, pp. 135–150, World Bank, Washington, DC.

Nwosimiri, O., 2022, 'Engaging in African epistemology as a form of epistemic decolonization', *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 11(4), 75–88.

Okwany, A. & Ebrahim, H., 2016, 'Rethinking epistemology and methodology in early childhood research in Africa', in A. Farrel, S.L. Kagan & K.M. Tisdall (eds.), *The SAGE handbook of early childhood research*, pp. 431–438, Sage, London.

Okwany, A. & Ebrahim, H.B., 2018, 'Creating visibility for birth to 3 in Africa: A push from the margins', in H.B. Ebrahim, A. Okwany & O. Barry (eds.), *Early childhood care and education at the margins*, pp. 1–15, Routledge, London.

Omodan, B.I., 2023, 'Unveiling epistemic injustice in education: A critical analysis of alternative approaches', *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 8(1), 100699. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100699

Padayachee, K., Harris, G., Maistry, S. & Lortan, D., 2022, 'Exploring the value of the indigenous knowledge of Ubuntu in early childhood education in South Africa', *Africa Education Review* 19(3), 78–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2023.2243379

Pence, A., 2007, 'Early childhood development and E-learning in Africa: The early childhood development virtual university programme', *E-Learning and Digital Media* 4(1), 15–23.

Pence, A., 2013, 'Voices less heard: The importance of critical and indigenous perspectives', in P. Britto, C. Super, & P. Engle (eds.), *Handbook of early child development research and its impact on global policy*, pp. 161–180, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Pence, A., 2023a, 'Introduction', in A. Pence, P. Makokoro, H.B. Ebrahim & O. Barry (eds.), *Sankofa: Appreciating the past in planning the future of early childhood education, care and development in Africa*, pp. 23–28, UNESCO, Paris.

Pence, A., 2023b, 'Sankofa reflections on ECD country stories', in A. Pence, P. Makokoro, H.B. Ebrahim & O. Barry (eds.), *Sankofa: Appreciating the past in planning the future of early childhood education, care and development in Africa*, pp. 295–298, UNESCO, Paris.

Pence, A. & Ashton, E., 2016, 'Early childhood research in Africa: The need for a chorus of voices', in A. Farrel, S.L. Kagan & K.M. Tisdall (eds.), *The SAGE handbook of early childhood research*, pp. 380–397, Sage, London.

Pence, A.R. & Marfo, K., 2004, 'Capacity building for early childhood development in Africa', *International Journal of Educational Policy, Research and Practice* 5(3), 5–12.

Pence, A. & Vargas-Barón, E., 2023, 'African international ECD conference series. Stories and perspectives from Africa are crucial for the future of early childhood care and education', in A. Pence, P. Makororo, H.B. Ebrahim & O. Barry (eds.), *Sankofa: Appreciating the Past in Planning for the Future of Early Childhood Education, Care and Development in Africa*, pp. 145–148, UNESCO, Paris.

Penn, H., 2005, *Unequal childhoods*, Routledge, Oxon.

Ritchie, J., 2023, 'Unknowing - on the incompleteness of theory, or the urgency of "Deeds not Words"', *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal* 10(1), 53–57.

Solis, L., Khumalo, K., Nowack, S., Blythe-Davidson, E. & Mardell, B., 2019, 'Toward a South African pedagogy of play, Working paper', *Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education*, viewed 12 February 2024, from http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/toward-a-south-africanpedagogy-of-play.

Soto, L.D. & Swadener, B.B., 2002, 'Toward liberatory early childhood theory, research and praxis: Decolonizing a field', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 3(1), 38–66. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2002.3.1.8

Thalmayer, A.G., Toscanelli, C. & Arnett, J.J., 2021, 'The neglected 95% revisited: Is American psychology becoming less American?', *American Psychologist* 76(1), 116–129. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000622

Tobi, A., 2022, 'Epistemic injustice and colonisation', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 41(4), 337–346. https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2023.2199605

UNICEF, 2023, *Prospects for children in the polycrisis: A 2023 global outlook*, viewed 4 January 2024, from https://www.UNICEF-Innocenti-Prospects-for-Children-Global-Outlook-2023.pdf.

Viruru, R., 2000, *Early Childhood Education. Postcolonial perspectives from India*, Sage, New Delhi.

Woods, A., Mackenzie, N.M. & Wong, S., 2013, 'Social justice in early years education: Practices and understandings', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 14(4), 285–289. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2013.14.4.285