



Understanding inclusion in early childhood care and education: A participatory action learning and action research study



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Background: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to the care and education of children from birth to age four. There is a scarcity of research on inclusion in this marginalised sector in many developing countries, including South Africa.

Aim: This article reports on a virtual learning participatory workshop on understanding inclusion with six ECCE teachers and two ECD practitioner trainers.

Setting: Due to the social distancing necessitated by the Corona Virus pandemic, all interactions were facilitated through the WhatsApp platform.

Methods: The study employed a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design that focuses on collaborative and contextually relevant learning and research. Data were generated in two iterative cycles using a baseline questionnaire, photovoice, reflective journals and purposeful conversations.

Results: Cycle one found that some of the participants' understanding of inclusion needed to be challenged. Their understandings of inclusion centred on discourses of disability with a narrow view of inclusion. This action learning set (ALS) mainly regarded inclusion to be a product rather than a process and claimed that segregation had some advantages. Some of the members of the ALS also misconstrued inclusion for micro-exclusive practices of assimilation and integration. Cycle two was planned to address these misunderstandings. Cycle two revealed that becoming inclusive means revisiting dominant ideologies about inclusion and a critical awareness of micro-exclusive practices.

Conclusion: This research serves to challenge dominant beliefs of what inclusion is. The knowledge presented here could be cascaded to other ECCE centres in the South African context. With a scarcity of research on inclusion in ECCE, this study may provide a point of departure for future research.

Keywords: inclusion; participatory action learning and action research; early childhood care and education, micro-exclusion, critical pedagogy.

Introduction

This article focuses on the impact of a virtual participatory workshop held with early childhood care and education (ECCE) teachers and early childhood development (ECD) practitioner trainers on inclusion and presents a segment of the findings from a larger study on inclusion in ECCE. Early childhood care and education encompasses the care and education of children from birth to age four, before the commencement of Grade R (eds. Ebrahim, Okwany & Barry 2019; Harrison 2020; Ring, Sullivan & Wall 2020). This study seeks to explore how teachers understand inclusion in ECCE using a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design. PALAR promotes collaborative critical reflection and dialogue for participants to develop their agency and become enablers of change (Luthuli & Wood 2020; Schoonen, Wood & Kruger 2021; Setlhare-Kajee 2018; Zuber-Skerritt 2018). Studies have emphasised that inclusion is an important aspect of a quality early years programme (Aubert et al. 2017; Underwood, Valeo & Wood 2012) as it ensures the equal access, participation and achievement of all children irrespective of diverse identities. Indeed, inclusion in the early years sets the groundwork for a more just society where everyone is respected and valued irrespective of diversity. How teachers understand inclusion is vital, as this shapes pedagogical, social and physical changes in the early learning environment (Aubert et al. 2017). False ideas regarding the conceptualisation of inclusion may be present and these need to be contested. Studies on

inclusion in ECCE, which are extensive in the Global North, have indicated that inclusion is context-specific, without a universally accepted definition or a standardised set of procedures that must be followed (Kirschner 2015; Krischler, Powell & Pit-Ten Cate 2019). As there is a scarcity of research on inclusion in the South African ECCE sector, this study attempts to fill in a significant gap in the contextual understanding of inclusion amongst practitioners. The knowledge from this study could be useful for other ECCE teachers to better understand inclusion.

Inclusion

This study highlights three critical components that enable an understanding of authentic inclusion in ECCE spaces. Firstly, to be truly inclusive, teachers need to adopt a broad understanding of inclusion, which moves from a narrow disability focus to a much wider array of concerns (Walton 2018). Inclusion narrowly refers to policies that mandate the education of disabled children alongside children in regular classrooms (Cologon 2019). This deficit or medical model was widely criticised as it situated the problem within the person (Swart & Pettipher 2016). The social model consequently transfers the emphasis from a personal inability to societal barriers experienced by a person with vulnerability (Ferrante 2012). Adopting a social model suggests that the essence of inclusion has much wider and deeper connotations, which challenge how the education system may reproduce and perpetuate social inequalities towards the marginalised in society (Liasidou 2012). These understandings of inclusion align with the Salamanca Declaration and the Education for All movement, which includes all marginalised groups comprising varying identities, including diverse abilities, races, languages, genders and socio-economic statuses (UNESCO 1994). Therefore, inclusion adheres to wider human rights, equality and social justice concerns (Ainscow 2005). Undoubtedly, moving from a narrow disability focus to a much wider set of concerns is more complex and difficult to achieve.

Secondly, this study emphasises that to attain authentic inclusion, inclusion must be understood as a lifelong and sustained journey of learning rather than a destination to be reached. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2005), inclusion can be seen as a fluid and dynamic process that searches continually for improved ways of dealing with diversity. In line with this, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG4) also calls for an education system which supports lifelong and sustainable learning (Mérida-Serrano et al. 2020). This requires individuals to continue to learn and thrive in complicated, challenging and ever-changing circumstances (Nakidien, Singh & Sayed 2021). To create inclusive spaces, teachers also need to be lifelong learners who are willing to learn, unlearn and relearn to adapt to a world that is constantly in flux. Undoubtedly, ECD centres are arenas of such transformation because of increasing diversity (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson 2021). This requires

teachers to rapidly unlearn and relearn to continually adapt their approaches to align with the principles of inclusion.

Thirdly, in this study, one needs to understand that a child's presence in and access to a centre does not guarantee authentic inclusion. In other words, when children are segregated and openly prevented from accessing centres, it is a more easily recognisable form of exclusion (Cologon 2019). This form of macro-exclusion is obvious and a matter of location (Faustino et al. 2017). For instance, children may be segregated in special schools or classrooms away from regular children. However, it is also of significant concern that children may have access to centres but still be excluded because of subtle forms of exclusion, which is termed micro-exclusion (Cologon 2019). Instances of micro-exclusion appear to be inclusive on the surface, as children have access to centres without authentic inclusion (Faustino et al. 2017). The issue is that micro-exclusion may enable the access and participation of children but does not guarantee the respect or achievement of these children in the ECCE learning environment. Evidently, authentic inclusion entails more than just a problem of location, because access does not guarantee inclusion.

This study highlights micro-exclusion that is commonly misunderstood as inclusion, where children of minority groups are integrated and assimilated in early settings. Integration can be described as a form of micro-exclusion. Here children are able to access an early years setting, but no considerations are made for their full participation and achievement (Zabeli, Perolli-Shehu & Gjellaj 2020). Similar to integration, assimilation also requires children to fit into the dominant culture, which results in a loss of personal identity (Daniels 2018). Therefore, one sees that understanding inclusion goes deeper than just location or the adopting of policies that ensure surface-led accommodations (Petriwskyj 2010). Inclusion requires a deep introspection into one's own attitudes to diversity and the power issues that may include or exclude certain groups of children.

The context of the study: Early childhood care and education

The need for a quality ECCE learning environment is receiving increased attention internationally. The United Nations SDG4, as mentioned above, emphasises an inclusive, equitable and quality education with lifelong learning opportunities for all children irrespective of diversity (Elfert 2019). Goal 4.2 highlights that to develop optimally, young children should have access to quality care and education services provided by professionals (Mérida-Serrano et al. 2020). Thus, SDG4.2 recognises early education as a powerful means to positively transform the world. In fact, ECCE access is related to positive long-term outcomes for marginalised groups of children (Cascio 2015). Research reflects that quality early programmes do not only benefit children and their families, but they also promote socio-economic benefits for society (Van der Gaag & Tan 1998). Evidently, a quality ECCE programme in developing countries results in positive outcomes for all.

Early childhood care and education has also been noted as a means of social and economic transformation in South Africa (Bipath & Joubert 2016). For instance, the National Development Plan for 2030 has identified quality ECCE as a tool to significantly reduce poverty amongst vulnerable communities (Twala 2021). The National Integrated Early Childhood Development (NIECD) Policy (Republic of South Africa 2015:23) states that 'investment in early childhood ... can limit inequality at its source'. In the state of the nation address in 2019, the state president of South Africa also emphasised strategic planning to migrate ECD to the Department of Basic Education, in order to provide the best support for the youngest members of society. Despite the importance of ECCE as a means of transformation, the inequality of ECCE services for the wealthy and the poor is still of grave concern (Ebrahim, Martin & Excell 2021; Koen, Neethling & Taylor 2021).

Hence, in South Africa, children may have access to ECCE programmes, but the quality of ECCE programmes is questionable. Inclusion can be regarded as an indicator of a quality ECCE programme which aims to achieve equity for all children (Aubert et al. 2017). To create this quality inclusive learning environment requires a teacher with specialised knowledge and skills. Researchers (Atmore 2019; Ebrahim 2018; Harrison 2020) concur that the quality of early childhood services requires a professionalised and competent workforce. This is a concern, as the current workforce comprises mainly underqualified teachers (Ebrahim et al. 2021). Focusing on improving professionalisation in the South African sector, the Draft Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Practitioners and Educators in Early Childhood Care and Education (MRQECDE) (DHET 2017) was gazetted. This lists the basic competencies for professionally qualified early childhood teachers, which include the ability to critically analyse the differentiated nature of South African society. The policy also highlights that teachers need to work in creative ways to affirm and welcome diversities in the early learning environment.

Implementing inclusive practice will depend largely on a teacher's knowledge of inclusion. Ginja and Chen (2021) suggested that teachers need to engage with training in order to boost their conceptual understanding of inclusion. With a sound understanding of inclusion, teachers may apply their situational knowledge and create inclusive learning spaces. Thus, this study aims to explore ECCE teachers' current understanding of inclusion and address deficits through collaborative learning. The research questions are the following:

- What is the current understanding of inclusion in ECCE?
- How can the understanding of inclusion in ECCE be transformed?

Theoretical framework

As this study aims to transform teacher thinking, it resonates with the principles of critical pedagogy as an overarching theoretical framework (Freire 2000). Freire's ideas highlighted

education as a political act, where teachers may play a role in transforming the learning environment by alleviating inequality (Darder, Torres & Baltodano 2017). This calls for teachers to develop a critical awareness or conscientisation of power dynamics in the learning environment and act against these (Gelot 2019). Conscientisation therefore questions dominant ideologies or belief systems. McLaren (2007:205) regards ideology 'as a way of viewing the world, a complex of ideas, various types of social practices, rituals and representations that are accepted as natural and as common sense'. In the context of this study, certain dominant beliefs regarding the understanding of inclusion need to be challenged.

To become conscientised, Freire suggested collaborative dialogue and problem-posing as a pathway to enable the transformation of classrooms (eds. McLaren & Kincheloe 2007). According to Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2012), conscientisation or critical consciousness is the ability of humans to act in morally appropriate ways that respect the freedom of others. This serves as a starting point for teachers to inquire into how their beliefs become enmeshed in the hidden curriculum (Darder et al. 2017). A hidden curriculum refers to the implicit values, behaviours and norms transferred without conscious intention and awareness by children and teachers (Sedigheh et al. 2019). To adopt a critical lens, the participants needed to retain their fluidity, resulting in a process of continually inventing and reinventing themselves (eds. McLaren & Kincheloe 2007). Through iterative cycles of dialogue and mutual collaboration, teachers were able to reflect on their current ways of thinking which shaped their personal and professional practice. Therefore, these ideas of conscientisation shaped the social transformation agenda of this study on inclusion as well as the research methodology of the study.

Methodology

This study adopts a PALAR design, which encompasses research with a unique learning component. Participatory action learning and action research aligns with a critical pedagogy and historically originates from Freire's 'culture circles' (Reingold, Derry & May 2020). The participants were purposefully selected according to who could best inform the research objectives and enhance an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Maree 2016). Teachers and ECD practitioner trainers from a selected ECCE training centre were invited to participate and form an action learning set (ALS). This refers to a group of people coming together to address real problems in their context (Morrison 2017). A PALAR design aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the research problem and foster close relationships amongst the participants; therefore, the ALS consisted of eight participants, comprising six ECCE teachers and two ECD practitioner trainers. As a result of the global coronavirus pandemic, the research needed to adhere to the restrictions stipulated by the government.

Participatory action learning and action research aims to benefit the community and enhance the existing knowledge, skills and values of the research participants (RPs).

Traditionally, academics from universities conduct research without providing any feedback or benefit to the members of the community (Setlhare-Kajee 2018). This research design attempts to address complex contextual challenges relevant to the research group. Participatory action learning and action research creates an environment where the RPs share their knowledge collaboratively and build on each other's experiences. As a result, the process of PALAR highlights the democratisation of knowledge production where the knowledge of all members is equally valued (McAteer & Wood 2018).

A PALAR design centres on its three Rs and seven Cs (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt 2013; Zuber-Skerritt 2018). The three Rs of relationships, reflection and recognition are interwoven with the seven Cs and are contingent on each other (Schoonen et al. 2021). Relationship building is an essential foundation of PALAR, and this important initial phase seeks to build trust and establish mutual goals and team spirit essential for the ongoing success and sustainability of a project (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare 2013). On the WhatsApp platform, participants introduced themselves, established common interests and shared mutual goals before the research phase began. In the research phase, principles of *compromise*, *communication commitment* and *collaboration* continued to strengthen relationships amongst the ALS. *Critical reflection* on the knowledge created and the research process assist in shaping future cycles of learning. By presenting their own videos, participants *coached* each other and shared their learnings. Their *competencies* in the form of photographs, captions and drawings were recognised for a proposed publication of an inclusive handbook to be distributed to other centres in the sector.

Participatory action learning and action research belongs to the action research genre, and the four steps of 'plan, act, observe and reflect' (Morrison 2017) guided each research cycle. In Cycle 1, to support the first step of planning, the participants completed a baseline questionnaire which determined the situation prior to intervention, with the intention of pinpointing areas in need of further action. This questionnaire was designed by the principal researcher. The *planning step* revealed that participants required a clearer understanding of the concept of inclusion. Most participants needed to adopt a broader view of inclusion that entailed more than just disability or special educational needs. The questionnaire also revealed that many of the participants regarded inclusion as a destination and were unaware of the concepts of micro- and macro-exclusion. Secondly, during the *acting step*, participants were engaged in watching videos and PowerPoint presentations prepared by the principal researcher. This was followed by the third step, which required a discussion of participants' *observations* as WhatsApp conversations. Participants provided their interpretations of each video and slide presentation. Strategic questions were crafted to stimulate in-depth critical thinking. Thus, participants built on each other's interpretations of the presentations, leading to a collective meaning-making. The fourth action research step involved thinking back

critically about learnings and the recording of participant *reflections*. The data from the journals were analysed using critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen 2019), which identified broad themes by noting incidences of recurrence, repetition and forcefulness within the data set. Participants contributed to the development of the broad themes; however, the principal researcher related these to relevant ideologies, which were then presented to the group for verification at the end of the first cycle.



The second cycle was informed by the second research question, which aimed to record the shift in participants' understanding of inclusion. This cycle was guided by the same four steps mentioned above. Propelled by the three areas of need revealed in Cycle 1, participants *planned* how to transform their understandings of inclusion. In the planning phase, guided by the principal researcher, participants recorded and shared their slide presentations to showcase their new understandings of inclusion. Secondly, during the *action* step of this cycle, participants used photovoice, a participatory visual method in which participants use their cameras to capture images that convey their feelings, beliefs and experiences and narrate their everyday experiences in their own words. Participants were prompted to provide an image of a drawing or object that represented their new understandings of inclusion according to the identified themes. In the *observation* step, the photos and captions were shared by the participants, followed by input from the participants. The principal researcher used the 'SHOWED' method (Luthuli 2019) to analyse the collaborative interpretations gleaned from the WhatsApp discussions. *Reflections* in participant journals confirmed the photovoice interpretations and shaped further cycles of inquiry.

Findings

The aim of the first research cycle was to identify deficits in RPs' understanding of the concept of inclusion. In Cycle 1, participants completed a baseline questionnaire to identify deficits in their understanding of inclusion. The findings revealed that most participants adopted a narrow view which referred to the inclusion of children with disability or special educational needs, instead of a broader view that included all diversities. The findings also revealed that participants mostly regarded inclusion as a destination rather than a process. The data in this cycle also revealed that participants were unaware of instances of micro- and macro-exclusion. Cycle 2 aimed to transform the understanding of participants by addressing these areas of concern. The results reported in Figure 1 include participant messages from Cycle 1 and 2. The three themes that emerged from the two research cycles are presented, supported by photovoice images, captions and participants' narratives.

Discussion and findings

This study highlights the process of conscientisation, where RPs engage in collaborative dialogue to question dominant

Themes	Cycle 1 narratives	Cycle 2 photovoice and captions
1. Moving away from narrow views of inclusion	<p>Narrow views of inclusion</p> <p>Participant discourses indicated narrow views of inclusion that centred on disability and medical deficits. For example, research participant 1, an ECCE teacher with 2 years of experience mentioned:</p> <p>‘Inclusion means helping children with all kinds of difficulties – like slow learners, disabled learners – and giving them a chance to feel special. It is about teaching the average child not to condemn children with differences but to respect them. This makes the disabled [or] slow learner feel welcome and feel comfortable in their learning environment, and it would show them that they too have a chance to learn. Teachers need to find ways of being accommodating to all learners and treat them all equal.’</p> <p>Research participant 5, an ECCE teacher with 27 years of experience stated that:</p> <p>‘Inclusion is difficult, as I am not qualified to be an inclusive teacher.’</p> <p>Research participant 3, an ECD teacher trainer with 2 years of experience as a trainer and 4 years as a teacher, claimed that:</p> <p>‘Children with disabilities need to be treated equally.’</p> <p>Research participant 2, an ECD owner with 7 years of teaching experience explained:</p> <p>‘There is a child in my class that is hyperactive; he doesn’t follow routine and he doesn’t do the work as the normal child. He is also the only child at home, so when he is around other children, he interferes with them by pulling their hair, which makes the children feel uncomfortable. He doesn’t pay attention, and neither can he clearly speak. He requires special attention by all. I by all means try to help him grow as an individual, but this is frustrating at times, as I do not have this kind of time, qualification or training.’</p> <p>After discussion, the ALS decided that although formal qualifications were worthwhile and an advantage – all teachers must attempt to be inclusive, as diversity is not just in the form of disability or special educational needs. All teachers need to be inclusive in their approaches and philosophy. The mention of children being treated equally is also arguable. Children are all diverse individuals and inclusive teachers aim to treat children equitably rather than equally. The use of certain words like ‘normal’ and ‘average’ was also questionable and aligned with a deficit perspective and a narrow view of inclusion.</p>	<p>Broad views of inclusion</p> <p>In Cycle 2, participant messages indicated broad views which included different diversities, not just disabilities or special educational needs. Narratives reflected inclusion as a philosophy and a means to attain broader goals of social justice.</p>  <p>Research participant 4, an ECD teacher trainer with 4 years of experience as a trainer and 12 years as a teacher, described:</p> <p>‘My drawing shows my new understanding of inclusion. In my picture it depicts different symbols of male, female, special needs, gay and lesbian. All these people I drew in one round circle which depicts Earth. It shows the coming together of all different types of people, whether race, colour, gender, sex, disability or religion.’</p>  <p>Research participant 6, a teacher with 5 years experience explained:</p> <p>‘Inclusion is supporting every child, regardless of ethnic background, culture, language, gender, socio-economic background or disability. Ensuring that every child is able to participate in activities. All kids to express who they are, feel safe from abuse, harassment or unfair criticism.’</p> <p>Research participant 5, an ECCE teacher with 27 years of experience stated that:</p> <p>‘Inclusion is meeting the needs of the community by celebrating diversity and individuality. It is knowing and understanding the needs of all children. Children are the future generation.’</p> 

RP, research participant.

FIGURE 1: Participants’ photovoice, captions and narratives for cycles 1 and 2.

Figure 1 continues on the next page →

Themes	Cycle 1 narratives	Cycle 2 photovoice and captions
2. The destination of inclusion is never really reached	<p>Inclusion as a product</p> <p>One participant indicated that inclusion was the goal of her teaching. This can be contested as inclusion requires a teacher to be aware that the journey or destination of inclusion is never truly reached. Teachers are always in a process of adjusting to changes in an attempt to become more inclusive. Research participant 6, a teacher with 5 years experience explained:</p> <p>‘Inclusive education is a goal for most schools. I think that this goal of inclusive education can be reached with the right mindset and with the right support.’</p>	<p>Inclusion as a process or journey</p> <p>Using a photograph of a painting lesson RP 7, a teacher with 7 years of experience explained how the children enjoyed the messy process of painting more than the finished product. She stated that the situation changed daily, and children were never the same from day to day. Hence inclusion was about consistent adjustment and learning.</p> <p>‘Like the process of painting, inclusion is a process, not a product – similar to this art activity.’ (RP 7)</p>  <p>Participants also explained how each day was different in their centres, as the children were young and were unable to hide their sadness or excitement. Being inclusive was ongoing and a daily struggle. Research participant 3, an ECD teacher trainer with 2 years of experience as a trainer and 4 years as a teacher, claimed that:</p> <p>‘Sometimes Dipho [a little four-year-old] comes to school feeling sad. He keeps thinking about his mum who passed away. For this child, I need to stop teaching and show him more care.’</p>
	<p>3. Moving away from micro- and macro-exclusion</p> <p>3.1. Macro-exclusion: Favourable views of segregation</p> <p>A few participants noted some positive aspects of segregation. For example, RP 2 mentioned that parents did not want their child to be bullied by regular children.</p> <p>‘I love the idea of inclusive education, but the reality is that children with special needs are often bullied and ridiculed by their peers. They are stared at by the other children, which makes them feel really uncomfortable. Little children can be so cruel. Parents, too, are aware of this and choose to segregate their children away from normal children.’</p> <p>RP 7 also expressed concern that inclusion could disadvantage children who were ‘regular’, as children with learning barriers required more of the teacher’s time.</p> <p>‘I have worked with a child with autism, and I find that he can become disruptive during my lessons. When there are sudden changes, he would become upset and certain sensory activities were too overpowering for him. I needed a lot of assistance to cope with my class in that year.’ Research participant 7, a 28 year old ECCE Teacher with 7 years of experience.</p> <p>Sometimes being in a smaller class also assisted children with special needs. Research participant 8, 42-year-old teacher with 14 years of experience explained:</p> <p>‘These children are easily accommodated where there are specially qualified teachers, more resources and smaller class sizes.’ (RP 8)</p> <p>These concerns were noted; however, it was emphasised that children could be accommodated in regular classrooms if suitable adjustments were made.</p>	<p>Segregation versus inclusion</p> <p>In Cycle 2, RP 6 demonstrated her understanding of segregation as two separate pegboards. One system for special education and another for mainstream education.</p>  <p>Research participant 6, a teacher with 5 years experience explained:</p> <p>‘Like round pegs in round holes, mainstream centres expect children to be the same and all need to fit in. Children at special schools are represented as square pegs in square holes, where the centre takes in children with a special need and all need to fit into the system.’</p> <p>RP6’s photo of the shape sorter reveals shapes of different kinds, which can be placed with ease into a system that can accommodate the diverse shapes.</p> <p>‘Like an inclusive centre, a shape sorter allows different shapes to fit in. The system is designed for all children.’</p> 

RP, research participant.

FIGURE 1 (Continues...): Participants’ photovoice, captions and narratives for cycles 1 and 2.

Figure 1 continues on the next page →

Themes	Cycle 1 narratives	Cycle 2 photovoice and captions
	<p>3.2. Micro-exclusion: Integration does not guarantee inclusion</p> <p>One participant stated that access and location automatically meant inclusion.</p> <p>Research participant 4, an ECD teacher trainer with 4 years of experience as a trainer and 12 years as a teacher, described:</p> <p>‘Our centre is inclusive because there are children who attend with special needs.’</p>	<p>Integration versus inclusion</p> <p>RP 6 used the pegboards to explain how children with specific needs were expected to be placed into regular classrooms without any form of accommodations to the environment. She compared these to forcing square pegs to fit into round holes. This corresponds with the concept of integration.</p>  <p>Research participant 6, a teacher with 5 years experience explained:</p> <p>‘I do not want to be responsible for damaging these square pegs by hammering them into the round holes.’</p> <p>Assimilation versus inclusion</p> <p>Assimilation occurs when a child loses his or her individual identity and has to ‘fit in’ with the dominant group.</p> <p>Research participant 5, an ECCE teacher with 27 years of experience stated that:</p> <p>‘Assimilation is compared to a melting pot of stew, where each individual flavour is lost. Inclusion is like a bowl of salad, where individual flavour remains intact.’</p> 
	<p>3.3. Micro-exclusion: Assimilation is not inclusion</p> <p>A few participants believed that children needed to fit in and lose their individual authenticity. For instance:</p> <p>Research participant 5, an ECCE teacher with 27 years of experience stated that:</p> <p>‘Children come from different backgrounds, but they are able to fit in so well and follow all the expectations of our centre. We have children who have learnt to understand English so quickly, despite speaking a different language at home.’</p>	

RP, research participant.

FIGURE 1 (Continues...): Participants’ photovoice, captions and narratives for cycles 1 and 2.

ideologies or false belief systems regarding inclusion. These transformed ideologies regarding inclusion enhance teacher pedagogical practice and the social and physical learning space. Hence, it was important for teachers to critically engage in discourses regarding their understanding of inclusion. Members of the ALS identified false ideologies that they shared regarding the concept of inclusion in Cycle 1. This gave impetus to Cycle 2, where the group attempted to redefine these understandings. The following discussion

attempts to synthesise the results from Cycles 1 and 2, the theoretical underpinning and the PALAR design to understand how the ALS transformed their understanding of inclusion.

Moving away from narrow views of inclusion

In Cycle 1, discourses on inclusion centred on disability or learning barriers were mostly dominant. This aligned with

the medical or deficit model that focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of a pathology (Swart & Pettipher 2016). Therefore, a few members of the ALS felt that special education teachers need to be trained to create inclusive learning spaces in ECCE. Members of the ALS mostly adopted a narrow view of inclusion, rather than focusing on all children vulnerable to exclusion. Later in Cycle 2, the ALS prepared presentations and recorded their learnings using reflective drawings, photovoice and captions. These new observations challenged narrow views of inclusion and aligned with the work of Dickins (2014) and Cologon (2019), where inclusion has broader human rights and a social justice agenda. In keeping with the new understanding, Dickins (2014) explains that inclusion:

[I]s based on a defined value system that equally welcomes, celebrates and respects diversity arising from gender, race, ethnicity, language, culture, belief systems, socio-economic or family background, and level of educational disadvantage or disability. This is underpinned by an acceptance that inequality, racism, ableism and other forms of prejudice and discrimination are deeply embedded in today's society. (p. 1)

Therefore, these deeply entrenched attitudes mentioned by Dickins need to be acknowledged and challenged as part of a defined value system that welcomes all who are vulnerable to exclusion, not just those experiencing barriers to learning or disability.

The destination of inclusion is never really reached

Critical pedagogy assumes that reality is dynamic and fluid and reconstructed through collaborative action and critical reflection (Aliyu et al. 2015). Some messages in Cycle 1 centred on inclusion as a goal to be reached rather than a process of becoming. As the PALAR process emerged, most participants indicated a need to examine their situation on an ongoing basis, where each day presented varied opportunities to readjust, reinvent and reconsider teacher choices. For RP 7 as an inclusive teacher, just like the children who enjoyed the process of creating their paintings, inclusion is a journey. In an ECCE learning environment, each day is never the same. There are new challenges to face, and these require constant adjustment and accommodation on the part of the teacher. Similarly, inclusion can be compared to a journey that never reaches a final destination, which is often challenging and takes commitment and ongoing efforts (Cologon 2019). In essence, a state of inclusion will 'emerge only through invention and reinvention, the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry beings pursue with the world and with others' (Freire 2000:53). Hence, in their shifts in thinking, participants emphasised that the destination of inclusion is never really reached.

Moving away from micro- and macro-exclusion

This theme is divided into three subthemes consisting of segregation, integration and assimilation. Firstly, segregation is a macro-exclusion that blatantly excludes certain groups of people (McKenzie 2021). Photovoice and captions from RP 6

align with the findings of Devarakonda (2014) and Corbett and Slee (2000) who explained that children at special schools could be represented as square pegs in square holes and children in mainstream schools as round pegs in round holes. These rigid schooling systems are predesigned to accommodate either a 'regular' child or a child with some deviation from the societal norm. Certain discourses in Cycle 1 regarded segregation as a practice that could be beneficial, as parents may want to protect their children from bullying by regular children. This is a parental choice that denies a child the right to become a fully integrated member of society. It is important to realise that inclusion is a basic human right, and segregation stigmatises the child as an inferior member of society (Cologon 2019). Importantly, a lack of socialisation amongst diverse groups results in a society that excludes and denies the presence of marginalised groups (Dickins 2014). Young children must experience living together with others who are different, to embrace diversity and form positive attitudes from a young age. Consequently, research on children experiencing barriers or disability, placed in inclusive learning environments, has indicated long-term benefits for both children experiencing barriers or disability and 'regular children' (Kart & Kart 2021).

Secondly, the photovoice and captions indicate the presence of integration as a subtle form of micro-exclusion. Children who deviate from the norm are compared to square pegs placed in round holes. This ineffective placement of children (square pegs) together within the same setting (round holes) without making adjustments or adaptations to the setting results in micro-exclusion. The children appear to be present but cannot fully participate or achieve. Sometimes, in forcing the square pegs into round holes, similar to children, they would become damaged, resulting in greater problems than outright segregation. Ferrante (2012) remarked that integration alludes to a deficit perspective where children's needs are connected to their 'disability' and not to their 'ability'. Therefore, deficit perspectives call for adjustments to be made to the child rather than the inflexible systems of educational settings.

Thirdly, when RP 5 presented photographs of stew and salad, she effectively described the concepts of assimilation. The stew represented assimilation, where the various ingredients lost their individual flavours, whilst the salad represented inclusion, where the individual flavours of each ingredient were retained. Reygan, Walton and Osman (2018) maintained that assimilation creates a situation where there are no separate social structures for diverse identities, thus perpetuating exclusion. The findings align with that of Dickins (2014), because this centre expected minority groups to conform to the dominant language and culture in order to belong. To move away from assimilation, differences amongst groups need to be accepted and even embraced and appreciated.

The PALAR learning component enabled the participants to make connections between their lived experience and the complex concepts pertaining to understand inclusion.

When participants used photographs of pegboards, shape sorters, stew and salad to explain concepts, others in the group could relate to them. This aligned with the findings of Freire (2000), who advocated that learners need to transform their lived experiences by using prior experiences to unveil new knowledge. Unless they are able to do this, 'they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing' (Freire 2000:19). Hence, using their lived experiences, participants were successful in making meaning of complex concepts.

This research is driven by a critical epistemological perspective, which attempts to discover real knowledge that is of benefit to society (Lochmiller & Lester 2015). It is likely that both blatant and subtle exclusionary practices devalue the identities of minority groups of people. Freire (2000:181) asserts that this is 'cultural invasion, which through alienation, kills the creative enthusiasm of those who are invaded'. In other words, children from marginalised groups are expected to conform to the ideals and practices of the majority, which results in a loss of individual identity. Freire cautions that 'without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle' (Freire 1985:186). Therefore, without a strong sense of identity, children may not develop free will, agency and self-actualisation.

Conclusion

The above exploration provides an in-depth exploration of how participants understand inclusion. This article presents a segment of a larger study on inclusion in the early years, drawing on the work of Freire, relevant literature and messages from participants to justify the findings of the study. This study enabled the participants to gain an in-depth understanding of inclusion by collaboratively sharing their lived experiences with an intention to transform and improve the lives of others. A process of reflection and action that built upon the lived experiences of the group was evident in the two cycles, producing a unique set of conceptualisations of inclusion. The key message of this study is that most participants refuted narrow views of inclusion and embraced broader views after the learnings. Also vital was the conceptualisation of inclusion as a fluid process of 'becoming' rather than a static goal. Participants used their unique lived experiences to explain concepts of macro-exclusion and a more subtle micro-exclusion. The understanding of inclusion presented in this study is a product of the unique contexts of the collaborative learning group. Although the RPs were both teachers and ECD practitioner trainers, there were no significant differences in their responses to the research questions. This could be because of these two ECD practitioner trainers being fairly new in the field of ECCE teacher training and having minimal exposure to inclusion in their training. It is possible that a different group of RPs would produce a completely different set of findings. This research aims to question dominant beliefs of what inclusion is. Using a PALAR design enables the voice and agency of a marginalised group of teachers. The knowledge presented

here would be cascaded to other ECCE centres in the form of a handbook on inclusion for the South African context. With a scarcity of research on inclusion in ECCE, this study may provide a point of departure for future research.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Authors' contributions

A.M. was the primary researcher who reported on her PhD study. She wrote the article. D.J.H was the supervisor of the study and contributed to the article by providing guidance regarding focus and structure.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

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

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