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# "You should give a child love and take them warm-heartedly from their parent": Preschool teachers' practice and understanding of care

## Abstract

*This paper is based on the exploration of township preschool teachers' perspectives of the act of caring. Caring has always been associated with women as they are seen as nurturers. Their role as mothers is regarded as a natural part of their being. This study explored preschool teachers' understanding of caring as well as its implementation. Literature confirms that caring has moral nuances and definite emotive features and that the one cared for is likely to develop intellectually. This paper interrogates "caring", as one of the features of quality. The paper is drawn from a larger qualitative study conducted on teachers' perspectives on quality. The study was conducted by using photovoice and observation. Caring was highlighted as a key element of quality in the preschools that were studied. Caring was understood within cultural practices of the communities that formed the sites of this study. Data revealed that caring should not be viewed in an exclusionary way that does not take into account the context in which it is practised. It is this caring that has positive spinoffs and has the capability of enhancing the quality of learning.*

**Keywords**: Care, culture, preschool, teachers, understanding, children

## 1. Introduction

The act of caring has always been associated with women, because traditionally they are the ones who raise children and are said to "possess more perseverance than the other sex" (James, 2010:521; Benhabib, 1989). It is, therefore, not surprising that preschools are predominantly the domain of women who tend to give attention to caring for children. Noddings (1986) portrays caring as having some moral nuances within it. She makes a distinction between caring "for" and caring "about". It is the "caring for" which has some implications for ethics, in that a person must step out of herself and take a keen interest in the needs of the one being cared for. This type of caring has definite emotive features, as the act of caring for someone raises some issues of affectivity. Goldstein (in McNamee, Mercurio & Peloso, 2007) asserts that "caring cannot be divorced from thought, and it is both an emotional and an

intellectual act; caring is a deliberate moral and intellectual stance rather than simply a feeling" (McNamee *et al.,* 2007: 278). If a person feels cared for, that person is likely to develop intellectually, as the acknowledgement one receives is bound to bring stability in the life of an individual. The sense of feeling good about oneself is the foundation of the *Attachment Theory* of Bowlby and Ainsworth, and it is associated with multiple positive outcomes such as social and emotional competence, intellectual growth and positive self-esteem (Ranson & Urichuk, 2008). A caregiver, who is able to provide the multiple outcomes in such a manner that children do not lose touch with their social and cultural background, makes it possible for children to explore their environment without fear (Ranson & Urichuk, 2008; Super, Harkness, Barry & Zeitlin, 2011).

This paper explores the act of caring experiences in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) phase of children in peri-urban preschools, as perceived by the teachers. This formed part of a bigger study that looked into the conceptualisation of quality as conceived by teachers and factors that contribute towards quality. This paper seeks to answer the following question:

> *What is the teachers' conceptualisation of care in South African preschools?*

In a quest to answer the research question, the next section will address the history of ECD in South Africa, and will proffer different understandings of the act of caring.

## 2.  History of early childhood development in South Africa

ECD provisioning in South Africa prior to 1994, the year the country was ushered into democracy came from a history of inequality, fragmentation and separate provisioning according to race (NEPI, 1992). The legacy of the past still lingers on despite drastic changes and interventions by the democratic government since 1994 to level the playing fields.

ECD in South Africa, as in the rest of the world, plays a critical role in the development of children (Artmore, 2014; Meiring, 2014) and in ensuring that children are ready to learn formally in school (DOE, 2001; Phatudi & Margetts, 2011). The South African government, since 1994 at the dawn of the democratic era, has been proactive and upcoming with strategies to ensure that the policy landscape creates and promotes an enabling environment in which ECD can thrive and grow so that the child's holistic development is addressed (Artmore, 2014; DOE, 2001; DSD, 2015; Meiring, 2014).

Despite new interventions to address disparity in ECD provisioning, the inequality in service provisioning and education of preschool teachers is still aligned to socio-economic contexts, with the more affluent areas having better qualified, trained teachers and resources, whereas the less affluent areas have less trained and even untrained teachers with poor resources.

## 3.  Problem statement

This paper is premised on the assumption that difference in resourcing can bring about differences in terms of philosophies that underpin practices in preschools. The ECD context in South Africa is disparate, unequal and has a large contingent of ill-trained teachers, especially in disadvantaged areas. There is bound to be differences in practices in the two main contexts in the country, i.e. the urban affluent areas and the rural and peri-urban disadvantaged areas, which are predominantly black.

Care is at the centre of the philosophy underpinning practice in the township preschools. This article argues that despite caring being an integral component of education in preschools, it has however been given prominence as an important attribute in the development of children. Practising caring is being noted as the way in which teachers feel acknowledged as individuals and is an outlet for making up for the lack of appropriate training (Penn, 2012). On the other hand, care dispensed at preschools is consistent with the culture and the context in which these preschools are situated. Ball (2010) and Fleer (2006) are of the opinion that ECD content should be reflective of local knowledges and should not reflect only the dominant discourse.

It is within the above context, that this paper is intent on seeking the understanding and implementation of care at two township preschools from the teachers' perspectives. It interrogates "caring" as one of the features of quality as mentioned by participants.

## 4.  Contextualising the act of caring and mothering

The act of caring is universal and is said to be instinctive behaviour that is related to feminine values (James, 2010; Thompson, 2003). Owen and Ennis (2005) enumerate different characteristics of caring as an expectation of a caring teacher. A caring teacher can become engrossed in the cared for child. Vogt (2002) likens caring as synonymous to parenting and mothering. This kind of caring involves commitment and that nothing else can take precedence over this act. Noddings (1984; 1986) further elaborates that this type of caring "evolves from a natural sympathy being innately felt for each other" (Owen & Ennis, 2005). Gilligan (1982), referring to this sense, says that women's integrity seems to be intertwined with the ethics of care. Women tend to enter into relationships by being emotionally connected in a situation (Vogt, 2002), thus it is not surprising that mothering and caring for children is regarded as a natural sphere for women (Vogt, 2002). The study conducted involved women who displayed traits reminiscent to those of a mother.

Despite caring being synonymous to mothering, there is a view that the act of caring is closely related to low-paying jobs and to lowly qualified personnel (Vogt, 2010; Penn, 2012). There is an assumption that policies for care are meant for the marginal groups, i.e. those who "are unable to live up to the autonomous expectations" (Barnes, 2011:159). However caring is defined as an act of cognition that affects the emotions (McNamee *et al.,* 2007). Despite the fact that it does not require skill, however it is said to "to imply higher responsibilities than taking care of, thus requiring knowledge, skills and experience of carrying out the act of caring" (McNamee *et al.,* 2007:279). Davis and Degotardi (2015) add that it involves "value judgements about something that is deemed worthy of care" (, 2015: 1739).

We tend to value and pay more for intellectual and highly skilled kinds of jobs that are often associated with capitalism, to the exclusion of considering the powerful impact of caring, ethics and morality associated with Ubuntu and more socially democratic orientations. This view tends to undermine the morality associated with care and societal values as it gives an impression that those who care occupy the lower ranks in their society, thus disregarding the importance of caring as a moral construct of ethical importance. This view is important in the study to understand the meaning accorded care by those involved in the act of caring.

## 5.  Care and its place in ECD policies

The South African ECD landscape has adopted the concept of care in its definition of this phase and in the name Early Childhood *Care* and Education. This is a move away from the previously held term of Early Childhood *Development* – thus giving prominence to *care,* which was previously taken for granted as given and embedded within the phase. Highlighting care in the policy documents and reports has implications in how this phase should be understood and interpreted. The interpretation of care and its practice by ECD practitioners is the basis and core of this paper in view of the vast and different characteristics associated with the act.

The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy on caring includes health and nutrition, thus adding material notion to the term (DSD, 2015). Care that is relational, intuitive and is based on ethics (Noddings, 1986) includes physical care. Adding materialism to the concept, adds to the complexity of the ability to care for someone. This, however, is not part of this article. Since care is included in ECD policies, it is expected that it should be given prominence in ECD centres. Hedge and Mackenzie (2012:193) say that even if care as a concept is used alongside education "it is often questioned as a good thing, and what good care is about, is left to the schools to untangle". The interpretation of care and its enactment is at the centre of this paper.

## 6.  Theoretical framework

Super and Harkness (2002) use the concept of a "developmental niche" to explain infant development as structurally patterned. They describe care as "based on cultural beliefs and practices of caregivers". The developmental niche framework is helpful in that "it facilitates parsing the child's daily environments into what we believe are operational subsystems" (Super & Harkness, 2002:271). These are the physical, social and historical influences, as well as customs and practices of childcare and rearing, which shape how children are socialised and cared for by the community. They are an integral part of the environment the child grows up in. The act of caring and its practices within the child's community and caring practices are therefore defined by the culture and traditions of the group (Super & Harkness, 2002; Harkness & Super, 1994). Fleer (2003) makes an assertion that children's learning cannot be understood by using the single lens of the dominant discourse. Learning and development of children are embedded "within real community contexts featuring real situations" (Fleer 2003:67). She discounts the manner in which preschool classrooms are structured for "effective learning". Observing children and classrooms privileged the individual and never took into account "what adults were saying or doing" (Fleer, 2003:68). Children learn by observing adults or modelling what adults do. Caring illustrated in the article is consistent with how the teacher dispensing the caring was raised. The interplay between caring and its embeddedness within the environment, i.e. the socio-cultural context, makes an important assumption that teaching and learning content or interactions in preschools have to be based on and aligned to such contexts. In the words of the teacher, children should imbibe the community practices from which they come from. Caring, therefore, cannot be understood outside the socio-cultural contexts of the school, but it is shaped and practised within these precincts. Singer (1998) says that psychologists have to be aware that the pedagogies of childhood cannot be reduced to scientific inquiry alone, but are framed within the cultural values, which are locally and contextually bound.

John Whiting's "model for psycho-cultural research" (Whiting 1977:155 quoted in Super & Harkness, 2002:547) draws parallels between "features in the history and in the natural environments" and "the manner in which children in that society are cared for", as being distinguishable from others. Thus, there is a correlation between "natural environments" and "cultural practices". Whiting furthermore states that people, who are part of the child's environment, determine the type of interactions and relationships they have with children.

The child as part of the cultural context, in which s/he develops, is likely to be cared for according to the dictates of the cultural group s/he comes from (Edwards, 2007). Super and Harkness (2002) maintain that the synergy between the physical and social settings of the child, the customs and practices of the context the child grows up in, and the beliefs of the caretakers, shape the child's opportunities for learning. Therefore, the familiarity of all these factors will increase the child's opportunities for learning.

# 7.  Methodology

This article is based on a larger qualitative study conducted on teachers' perspectives on quality. The original study included six teacher participants from suburban and township preschool contexts of South Africa. Their qualifications ranged from a university degree to a diploma in ECD. These were obtained through universities or NGOs. The teachers' teaching experience ranged from three years to ten years. The highest qualification of teachers in township preschools was a diploma and the lowest was a certificate in ECD offered by NGOs. One of the teachers with a certificate qualification was registered for an accredited qualification with one of the higher education private providers.

Township contexts are still largely underdeveloped and disadvantaged whilst suburban contexts have become multiracial, multicultural and advantaged.

The study was conducted using photovoice (Wang, 1999). The permission was obtained from the participants involved in the study. Photovoice was first used with marginalised communities to represent their community's strengths and concerns from their own perspective through photographs (Wang, 1999). Photovoice helps in interrogating "contextually based meanings from an insider perspective as a means to generate new insights into our constructed realities and cultures" (Sutton-Brown, 2014: 170). It is through the meanings that participants give to photographs by narrating their everyday experiences that they visually present the realities to research. Photovoice can help in reducing the culture differences between participants and researchers, as the lived experiences are clearly narrated from the participants' perspective without intrusion into the space of the participant.

Photovoice allowed teachers to reflect on their practices and identify what they regarded as quality. At the beginning of the study, participants were given cameras to take photos of what they regarded as quality in their interactions and relationships with children. Quality could refer to accessing resources, following the daily routine, integrating research into the programme, and simply caring for children. One theme that emerged from the study was the caring role that teachers in the peri-urban schools highlighted as quality. This paper interrogates the theme of caring by two peri-urban teachers. It uses a sociocultural lens to understand the particular nature of "care" within the township context and its relationship to the ethics of care (Noddings, 1986) and feminist perspectives. The study was interested in the teachers' narratives – thus pictures taken in class were relevant and suitable as teachers could engage and relate them to incidences in class that were construed as representing care.

Observation was employed as an additional data collection tool to confirm or disconfirm what teachers proclaimed when discussing pictures taken in their classes.

Participants were asked to take at least 30 photos of what they believed to be quality within a one-month period. The researchers collected the cameras, processed the photos and took them back to the schools. Quality is viewed as constructed, subjective and based on values and beliefs (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). From this perspective, determinations of quality reflect contextually relevant judgements; thus, no one definition of quality can be applicable to all contexts.

The photos were brought back to the centres and participants were asked to select at least 10 that defined quality better than the others. The findings discussed here are based on the views of two participants from the township areas, who highlighted caring as crucial to quality. At the time of the research, Mary, one of the teachers, had a post-school diploma qualification in ECD. She was registered for a degree in ECD with a distance-learning university in South Africa. The other teacher, Johanna, was registered for a post-school diploma. She had an intermittent position at the centre. At the time of the study, she had only been in her position as a teacher for three months, but had taught at the centre for a much longer period before being re-employed again. The teachers, through the discussion of the photos, showed how they interacted with children and families. A tape recorder was used to capture the essence of the discussions.

Thematic analysis was used to categorise, express and report the obtained data (Creswell, 2007). As the pictures and explanation of pictures continued, the researcher deliberately paid attention to emerging themes from the research respondents' transcripts and pictures. The researcher looked out for similarities between the themes that emerged as the transcripts were read over and over and pictures were scrutinised as to the extent to which they portrayed quality. Amongst the themes that emerged was the one that highlighted care as important in defining quality. This article is based upon this theme.

## 8. Findings and discussion

The photographs taken by the teachers in this research study offer a snapshot of the activities and interactions that occurred between the teachers and children inside and outside the class. They represent the arrivals in the morning and departures at the end of the day. They were also taken during class activities, meal times and during napping time. In some of the instances, teachers' actions highlighted caring as fundamental to interactions with children.

Caring is seen as the extension of mothering (Griffin, 1997 in Vogt, 2010). This is a characteristic of caring that was highlighted by the participant teachers in the study. These teachers saw children as unique individuals with particular strengths to harness and nurture. These teachers also saw themselves as extensions of the children's family. Their work with children was meant to link the home and the preschool. Caring was uppermost in their dealings with the children and teachers intentionally worked to connect home and centre goals of care and learning for each child.

### 8.1 An act of caring as a teaching-learning strategy

Teacher Johanna spoke about the strengths of a child as a starting point in her interactions with children. Every child, according to her, is unique, and therefore has to be treated as such. In particular, she referred to a boy in her class who was "slow" and never participated in group

activities. He was almost six years old and had delayed language development. She spoke with affection when she referred to the boy and his character. "My little Opelong is as slow as I said" – (the name Opelong means the Lord is in my heart). When dealing with Opelong, she was very considerate of the fact that he was learning more slowly than the other children in her class were. She never expected him to work quickly nor compared him to other children. Even when challenging him, the teacher was always conscious of the fact that he was different from other children. She devoted time to interact with him alone and initiated discussions with him far away from other children. She offered sheltered protection for him away from other children. When defining quality in ECD, she said that:

> …it is represented by knowing a child, to know a child as a whole… I must know how can he develop because they don't develop the same.

Her explanation of quality was punctuated by caring and mothering. She did not want anything adverse to happen to the boy.

Johanna was the least qualified of the two teachers who highlighted and practised caring in their relationship with children. Care in ECD policies is always associated with education; however, the form and level at which it is dispensed is a matter of the centre. The care offered by Johanna was embedded within cultural values embodied in Ubuntu. Virtues such as helping one another, doing chores such as tidying according to gender lines were prominent. Boys were expected to do masculine duties such as packing chairs, whilst girls had to sweep the classroom. Johanna, when referring to the photographs where children were expected to prepare the napping area so that she could see who could do it, said:

*They know they should tidy after themselves and put things in order.*



**Figure 1:**  Boys packing away chairs and girls packing away mattresses

Responding to the question on why duties were divided according to gender, she said that it is expected in the community they come from that girls sweep the house and boys carry out masculine duties. She was acting according to how she was raised, and was emphatic in that the centre should mirror the community it comes from. According to Crespi (2003), these practices are a process of socialisation whereby practices of the community are brought into the classroom. This view of caring, besides showing a sense of parenting and mothering has an inclination of being aligned to the practices of the community in which the child grows up and are defined by the culture and traditions of the group.

The "developmental niche" states that the development of children is based and shaped by the cultural beliefs and practices of caregivers (Super & Harkness, 2002). The development

of a child in the African context is viewed as a social rather than a biological construct. That is why children are given responsibilities according to the perceived competence and gender rather than age (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1998). However, teacher Johanna's caring practices are aligned to gendered roles (Crespi, 2003) and to traditional social responsibilities, instead of age. Since the school is seen as the extension of the home, she took on the role of the "mother" by socialising children into the practices reflected in the communities they come from. According to Crespi (2003), gender socialisation is a process that teaches children what it means to be a boy or girl. Atekyereza (2001) says that promoting gendered roles in Uganda had a negative effect of polarising roles with an adverse effect on their identity and self-esteem. He furthermore says that socialisation is tantamount to being subjected to "pressures – rewarding, punishing, – that push the child towards evoking certain acceptable responses" (Atekyereza, 2001:118). Gendered roles start in the home, and the schools being the microcosms of the societies they come from, are expected to promote those values held dearly in their communities (Atekyereza, 2001; Crespi, 2003).

Mary, another preschool teacher was more upbeat about her caring skills. She described how it is important to welcome children from home. Most of the children were brought into the preschools by taxis and it was therefore important to note those who arrived and those who did not. She spoke with pride about her caring and mothering role, which she assumed immediately when the children were brought into the centre. In the picture below, she is receiving a child from its mother so that the child transitions seamlessly into the preschool. She said:

> *To welcome and greet a child while they are still in their parents' care so that they don't feel like they are amongst strangers…And that is what I think is quality, to have an understanding about a child and how they are from home.*



**Figure 2:** Teacher Mary taking the child from its mother

Her approach of welcoming each child was to ease the transition from home to preschool for the child. In doing this, she was promoting and living the African proverb that says, "it takes a village to raise a child". It is not just the responsibility of the family alone, but the teacher too accepts the responsibility of looking after the child. Mary described the importance of the connection between home and school:

> *You should give a child love and take them warm-heartedly from their parent…they should feel welcomed…It is when they are enjoying what you are teaching, meaning whatever you give them it should be quality and at the end of the day, they should be able to enjoy themselves in the process.*

If children feel comfortable, that is a sign that quality is being upheld. Mary felt that care and developing self-help skills should be integrated into daily routines to promote independence. She regarded activities such as toilet routines important to promote, as it was through them that she could identify children who might be abused at home – something that she alluded to as occurring frequently.

From the two respondents, it became clear that both teachers highlighted the importance of a good home-school relationship. They saw their roles as teachers as an extension of the caring received at home, adding to the positive value and quality of the children's upbringing.

## 8.2  Caring as part of learning content

Caring was also evident in the teaching of specific skills as part of the curriculum. Mary used thematic instruction to weave together the cultural value of respect in their community. She would talk about road signs and colours of the robots (traffic lights), and develop the children's fine motor coordination through drawing and colouring pictures following the walk. Johanna referenced specific skills as her focus. Most of her discussion of activities had to do with children's ability to receive instruction in using crayons and scribbling or drawing − but these were never linked to a theme. This might have been her limited training in ECD. She made up for this by using her intuitive abilities to see each child as a unique individual with particular aptitudes to be nurtured, and she responded to them instinctively as a mother would. Intuition underlined her relationship to children. She used her experience as mother to provide for the needs of her children.

Mary emphasised the importance of guiding children's behaviour and correcting them when they were playing, especially if the game was dangerous and they could harm themselves.

> *You should supervise them. When they do something wrong they should be told…Firstly, you let them know whatever they are doing is wrong then and they would get hurt…when you teach them about safety, it is their safety. I think that is also quality.*

Guiding their behaviour was not only confined to the playgrounds and classroom. Both teachers, through modelling the culturally correct manner of greeting adults, made it a point that their children observe this and make it an integral part of their lives. This was acted out on trips taken into the neighbourhood to teach them how to cross the road. The lessons were multi-faceted; teaching safety on the road was combined with the teaching of respect for others they met. These trips were followed by the making of pictures, which were shared with the families, thus completing the home-to-school-to-home cycle of care and learning.

Care was used for the protection of the children and inculcating skills of independence. Children were seen as capable of looking after themselves, i.e. promoting their agency

that they could be trusted to learn how to take care of themselves. The teachers offered "scaffolding" to children so that for them to function optimally, they need to see caring being modelled by the experienced adults. Caring as an attribute in relationships, especially with young children, promotes affective, social and cognitive competences (Ranson & Urichuk, 2008). This pedagogy is foundational to the context in which the school is situated; and which is responsible for ensuring that its children have a sense of belongingness and respect for their own cultural background that is crucial for the stability and survival of every nation.

## 9.  Recommendations and conclusion

Despite the fact that the act of care is marked by certain characteristics that are universal, it can also take their cue from the context in which it is practised. Caring, in the preschools that were studied in this research, reflected the cultural practices of the community where the schools were located. As supported by Super and Harkness (2002) and Harkness and Super (1994), children's development is significantly influenced by the socio-cultural background they come from. Fleer (2006), in explaining the ideal preschool programme, says that it should reflect and uphold local knowledges more than the dominant discourse − as local knowledges are important in upholding the community and in maintaining stability from one generation to the other. Mwaura and Marfo (2011), however, posit that it is the confluence between local knowledges and the dominant discourse that has to be considered as content in a programme.

Teachers Mary and Johanna ensured that the values of the culture in which the centres were situated, were transmitted to children through the learning content. Caring, even if it is seen as custodial, has the importance of developing affective tendencies responsible for bringing about stability; thus the confidence to learn (Super & Harkness, 2002). Noddings (1986) says that caring relationships are reciprocal. The caregiver is rewarded by seeing that the caring act leads to development and growth in the ones being cared for. In the example of Opelong, teacher Johanna mentioned that the boy is no longer shy to come to her if he is unable to carry out a task − something that he would never have done in the early days. Building confidence in the boy has the potential of yielding positive results. Bass (2012) in his study, found that students who were better cared for said that they felt ready to venture and experiment with knowledge they would never have thought of if they had not enjoyed the results of caring.

The data of this study revealed that the act of "caring" should never be viewed in a way that excludes the context in which it is practised. However, care should be exercised not to perpetuate traditional practices that are exclusionary in nature and elevate one gender over the other (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1998; Okwany, 2016). The teacher has to be cautious that in promoting and socialising children, she does not fall into the trap of over emphasising practices that are demeaning of other genders. In a study conducted on teachers' views on caring, it was concluded that in practising "caring" it is not about protecting children, nor is it about feeling good about the children under their care, it is about "teachers' thoughtful educational and moral understanding and decision making" (Tirri & Husu, 2002:67). Care that is inclusive of education should underpin childhood professionalisation and pedagogy (Davis & Degotardi, 2015).

Teachers therefore should be conscious of the need not to unnecessarily accentuate gender differences, so that later in life girls are afforded the same political and economic equality as men (UNESCO, 2003). Schools are the places where some of the dearly held

beliefs and traditions of the community can be challenged by not accentuating differences. Accentuation of these differences is congruent with results of studies that have found that girls leave school early to get married or are pushed out of school because they cannot cope with schoolwork due to the demands made upon them at their homes (Atekyereza, 2001).

This study gave new insights into the perceptions of preschool teachers regarding the essence and situatedness of caring. It also highlighted the fact that "caring" and "carers" should not be under-valued when compared to the esteemed tasks of more "learned" professionals, as these acts have the potential to have positive spinoffs in the lives of children. Programmes for teacher education should consider including care in their curriculum. A caring teacher is able to instil a sense of worth in children; this enhances their academic performance.

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