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Reimagining Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education: A Posthuman Perspective¹

Ashnie Mahadew

ORCID No: [0000-0002-9432-6014](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9432-6014)

University of KwaZulu-Natal

MahadewA@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

Despite global and national imperatives to build an inclusive society, incidences of discrimination on the basis of numerous marginalised identity markers are widely reported. The early years are an ideal moment for children to form initial attitudes towards different groups of people. In fact, the early years are regarded as a means for social and economic transformation, according to the South African National Development Plan. This article is a segment of a study on a group of early childhood care and education teachers and teacher trainers who explored inclusion using a participatory action learning and action research design. Eight members formed an action learning set and engaged in mutual and collaborative learning to transform their learning environments to become more inclusive. Data were generated in two iterative cycles using a baseline questionnaire, reflective journals, and purposeful conversations. Underpinned by the posthumanist perspective, the findings highlight that diversity needs to be regarded as a strength to be valued, rather than as an impediment. The findings also suggest the need for collectivism in opposition to individualism, and a reconfiguration of the child's identity as posthuman. The study thus contributes to positive outcomes by identifying ways to transform early learning environments to become more inclusive. This not only leads to a more democratic and socially just learning environment but also contributes to wider positive societal change.

Keywords: inclusion, early childhood care and education, participatory action learning and action learning, posthumanism

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Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for young children to have access to high quality care and education services provided by qualified professionals (Méri​da-Serrano et al., 2020). This recognises quality early education as a powerful means to positively transform the world (Engdahl & Furu, 2022). Creating an inclusive learning environment is regarded as one way of ensuring a quality early years programme (Aubert et al., 2017). To become inclusive, teachers need to be prepared to continually learn and adapt to ever changing situations—they need to invent and reinvent themselves because the process of inclusion is dynamic and evolving (Cologon, 2019; Winter & Raw, 2010). Aligned with these ideas of the ongoing evolution and adaptation to change, a posthumanist orientation (Murriss, 2016) offers a unique perspective on understanding inclusion. This study explored a posthuman influence on concepts of diversity, collectivism, and child identity, which are by no means exhaustive as elements to promote inclusive early learning spaces.

Inclusion

In keeping with the Salamanca Statement, this study adopted a broad view of inclusion that calls for equal opportunities and access for diverse learners, including diversities in race, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, trauma, learning styles, and disability (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1994). The practice of inclusion is regarded as context-specific, without a universally accepted definition or standardised set of procedures that must be followed (Krischler et al., 2019).

Firstly, research on inclusion emphasises that teachers need to understand diversity as an element that accommodates all kinds of differences, not just disability. Diversity is complex and intersectional given that groups of people may be classified into multiple identity categories comprising race, language, gender, socioeconomic status, and ability that can result in marginalisation (Mentis & Kearney, 2018). In fact, the Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017) lists basic competencies for professionally qualified early childhood development teachers. The competencies listed emphasise that teachers need to have an understanding of, and need to be able to critically analyse, the complex and differentiated nature of South African society. Additionally, they need to learn to work in creative ways to facilitate the diverse challenges encountered by young children and their families. Despite this, concerns regarding teacher understanding of diversity provide a significant challenge in the promotion of inclusion (Hummel & Engelbrecht, 2018; Kaldi et al., 2018; Reygan et al., 2018).

Secondly, research indicates relationship building with families and communities may be an important means to promote an inclusive learning space. When families and communities feel welcomed and have a say in the governance of an institution, exclusion is reduced (Beveridge, 2013). Teachers can teach without understanding the child's background or their family situation. However, the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) stipulated that parents should be in partnership with schools as part of a school governing body (SGB). Yet, despite the existence of the SGB in South African public schools, the involvement of parents remains a concern (Moodly, 2019; Sibanda, 2020). Evidently, teachers need to be aware of the rich resource that parents and community provide in their journey towards inclusive education.

Thirdly, research also indicates that inclusive learning spaces move away from the traditional teaching methods where the teacher is the sole provider of knowledge and the child is a passive recipient (de Sousa et al., 2019; Meyer, 2018). In the early years, play offers an opportunity for children to choose freely and learn by trial and error at their own pace (Wong & Kasari, 2012). For example, in a study on children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, Papacek et al. (2015) found that play practice offered a successful strategy for the promotion of inclusion in educational settings. In fact, play is an optimal means for children to grow and develop in the early years (Jensen et al., 2019; Kinard et al., 2020; Saracho, 2020; Zosh et al., 2019). Despite this recognition of play as a valuable tool in the promotion of inclusion and a medium for learning, findings in a recent census in the South African education sector revealed that the daily programmes allocated little time for play, and that resources to facilitate play were largely lacking in centres (Department of Basic Education, 2022). Furthermore, the sector is plagued with schoolification—where play takes a back seat at the expense of real learning (Ebrahim et al., 2019; Ring et al., 2020). School systems place pressure on the early years “as a preparation place for school instead of preparation for life” (Bipath & Theron, 2020, p. 227). Seemingly, schoolification disregards the child’s voice and agency as a capable and active learner.

For this article, we therefore highlight that teachers may create inclusive centres by understanding diversity, building partnerships with stakeholders in the sector, and emancipating the child as an agent in their learning.

Context of Study

The study focused on the experiences of six early childhood care and education (ECCE) teachers who worked with children aged from birth to 4 years (Harrison, 2020) and two ECCE practitioner trainers. The South African government has earmarked early childhood development (ECD) as a means to alleviate the cycle of poverty in its National Development Plan for 2030 (Republic of South Africa, 2012). Despite this, the sector is plagued by wicked problems including unequal access to quality care and education facilities, unclear roles of teachers, poor infrastructure and funding from government, and the ineffective teaching of children with special educational needs (Khumalo, 2022). Also of concern, is that 90 per cent of the ECD workforce remains un- or underqualified. Studies (e.g., Henry & Namhla, 2020) have highlighted that the diverse nature of children in early childhood education classes requires teachers with specialised knowledge, skills, and competencies to design daily routines that promote the early well-being and inclusion of children. Indeed, creating inclusive learning spaces is an indicator of a quality ECCE programme (Underwood et al., 2012), which requires a specialised skill set for teachers to enable the access, participation, and achievement of all children, irrespective of marginalisation.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is supported by salient concepts drawn from a posthumanist perspective. To better understand posthumanism (after humanism), it is essential to first explore the humanist perspective—a way of looking at what it is to be human (Barden, 2020). The humanist movement brought the Middle Ages to an end with a change to thinking more centred on humans as the measure of all things (Snaza & Weaver, 2014). This was evident in the art forms and literature of the Renaissance period (Moran, 2018). In keeping with humanist ideas in ancient Greece, Leonardo da Vinci created a drawing of the Vitruvian Man as a perfect specimen of humanity—male, able-bodied, bourgeoisie and White—situated at the centre of the universe (Braidotti, 2013). Posthuman perspectives challenge these Western anthropocentric ideas and reimagine the concept of what it is to be human (Barden, 2020). Posthumanism perspectives reject the rigid boundaries between human, animal, nature, and machine

and, relevant to this study, emphasise that race, gender, or class can no longer define what it is to be human (Haraway, 1985).

Posthumanism is a broad philosophical school with various interpretations in different disciplines. It is not possible to elaborate on all aspects of posthumanism in this article. I therefore draw on three salient principles of posthuman theories that are relevant to this study on inclusion. Firstly, posthuman perspectives adopt a worldview in which ideas about the perfect human need to be subverted. In other words, humanism's ideal human—male, able-bodied, White, and bourgeoisie—needs to be challenged. Posthumanism calls for the restructuring of our ideas about diverse groups that are othered, and where marginalised identity markers are seen as a norm rather than as a deviation (Barden, 2020). Therefore, it follows that instead of fixing people to be assimilated (Reygan et al., 2018) into standardised ideas of “normal,” we need to reject this idea of normal. Diversity then, is not seen as a problem or deviation but as a rich resource that enhances the early learning environment. Secondly, posthumanism emphasises interconnectedness with others as well as collective, rather than individual, achievements (Braidotti, 2013). This implies that learners, teachers, families, and communities all need to work together to create inclusive early learning spaces. Thirdly, posthumanism contests Western dominant, ageist, child development discourses, in which the child is seen as a lesser human or a marginalised other (Murriss, 2019). These ageist discourses exclude because the child is seen as a human in the making, waiting to become an adult, whereas posthumanism emphasises the *being* child as an already active agent in their learning and development.

This study thus aims to explore inclusion by adopting a posthumanist perspective in the early learning environment. The research reported here is part of a larger study on inclusion in early childhood care and education (Mahadew, 2022) that has been revisited through a posthumanist lens. This study is informed by the following questions:

- What is the current situation regarding inclusion in the early learning environment?
- How do we adopt a posthuman perspective to transform the learning environment to become more inclusive?

Methodology

This article reports on a segment of a virtual learning participatory workshop held with six ECCE practitioners and two ECCE practitioner trainers who were purposively selected to participate in the study according to who could best inform the research objectives and enhance an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Maree, 2016). The research was carried out virtually due to the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants were all associated with a training centre that was established in 1996 as a community-based nonprofit ECD organisation. The research site provides training for ECCE practitioners and caregivers working with babies, toddlers, and young children in different settings in both isiZulu and English language mediums. The six teachers were registered or prospective students, and the trainers were employees of the organisation at the time (Table 1). This group that worked together on real challenges in their environments, and used their individual knowledge and skills to facilitate deeper learning, became known as an action learning set (Morrison, 2017). The study employed the participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design (Luthuli, 2019; Wood, 2020) that seeks to develop the agency of research participants by drawing from their strengths to facilitate positive change in their relevant contexts.

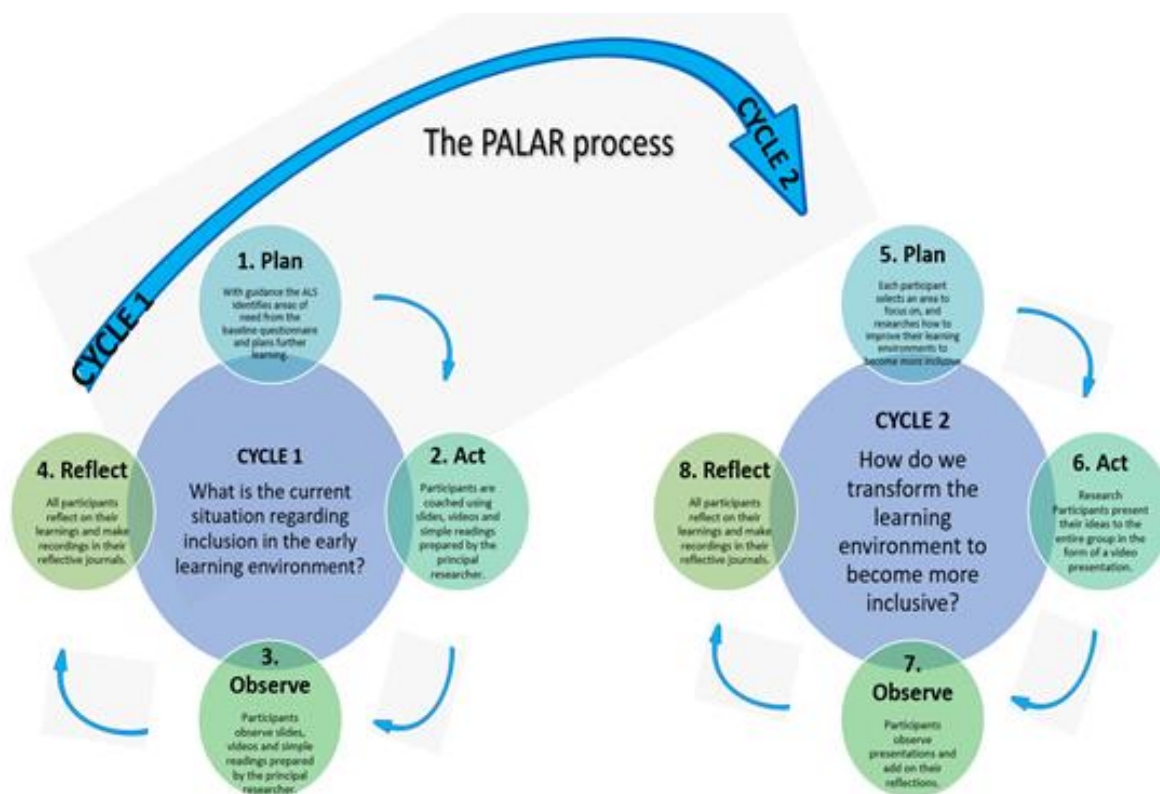
Table 1: Biographical Details of Research Participants

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT	AGE	GENDER	WORK EXPERIENCE	OCCUPATION	QUALIFICATION
Research Participant 1	22	Female	Teacher, 2 years	ECCE teacher	NQF LEVEL 4 ECD certificate
Research Participant 2	28	Female	Centre owner and teacher, 7 years	ECCE teacher	Bachelor of Education student NQF LEVEL 5 ECD certificate
Research Participant 3	27	Female	Teacher, 4 years and trainer, 2 years	ECCE teacher & trainer	NQF LEVEL 5 ECD certificate
Research Participant 4	34	Female	Teacher, 12 years and trainer and assessor, 4 years	ECCE teacher, trainer and assessor	NQF LEVEL 6 ECD certificate
Research Participant 5	59	Female	Teacher, 20 years	ECCE teacher	Matric Prospective student
Research Participant 6	26	Female	Teacher, 5 years	ECCE teacher	NQF LEVEL 4 ECD certificate
Research Participant 7	28	Female	Teacher, 7 years	ECCE teacher	Matric Prospective student
Research Participant 8	42	Female	Teacher, 14 years	ECCE teacher	NQF LEVEL 6 ECD certificate

PALAR research design is “a conceptual integration of lifelong action learning and participatory action research” (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015, p. 1). In essence, PALAR is research that benefits the community, resulting in the enhancement of knowledge, skills, or values of the research participants. The in-depth study took place in iterative cycles of research and learning, however, for this article, only the first and second research questions are addressed (see Figure 1). For each cycle, the research followed the plan, act, observe, and reflect steps used in the action research genre (Wood, 2020; Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). In Cycle 1, participants were presented with a baseline questionnaire that served to identify the current situation (Ojageer, 2019) in terms of inclusion at their centres. Stemming from the analysis of the baseline questionnaire, the principal researcher then identified areas that required greater understanding. Participants were also encouraged to provide input and critique the responses presented on the questionnaires. In this way, during the action step, areas of need were identified and discussed collaboratively in the group. Because this paper reports on part of a larger study on inclusion (Mahadew, 2022), only three prominent concerns, namely, understandings of diversity, the need for collectivism, and the need to promote the agency of the child are discussed in this article. During the action stage, the participants were presented with the above prominent concerns, and collaborative discussions enabled further learning. As part of the learning in PALAR, participants were also coached further regarding these prominent concerns using slides, videos, and simple readings prepared by the principal researcher in this step. The above steps led to observation, and collaborative and individual

reflections that were recorded in each participant's reflective journal. The reflections also shaped the next cycle of learning.

Figure 1: The PALAR Process (adapted from Mahadew, 2022)



The second research question informed the second cycle of inquiry and learning. The participants were asked how they could transform the learning environment to become more inclusive. During the planning phase, each participant chose an area to focus on, and researched how to improve their learning environments to become more inclusive. During the action step, each participant presented to the entire group, an image in the form of a drawing or photograph with a caption that highlighted their ideas. Participants observed the images, added to the captions, and recorded the lessons learnt in a reflective journal.

For this article, data were generated using baseline questionnaires, reflective journals, and purposeful conversations. First, the baseline questionnaire was handed to the participants at the beginning of Cycle 1 in order to ascertain their knowledge prior to the start of the PALAR project. The questionnaire comprised 60 questions that the ALS ticked and commented on. Similar to Ojageer (2019), the principal researcher drew up the questionnaire, which aimed to identify gaps in knowledge, areas of strength, and serve as a point of departure for future cycles of inquiry. Secondly, data were generated using reflective journals, which enhanced participants' critical thinking skills and assimilation. These are cornerstones for professionals to reflect upon their practice (Göker, 2016). After each cycle, participants completed a reflective journal, which guided processes for the following cycle. Thirdly, purposeful conversations were carried out on a WhatsApp group, which enabled the triangulation of data and facilitated probing to generate a greater depth of information as the participants were able to clarify their thoughts and feelings (Neethling, 2015). Essentially, these were records of informal

conversations done by the participants throughout the research cycles. For this article, the three sources of data were transcribed and then analysed using critical thematic analysis.

The process of critical thematic analysis began with the identification of repeated words and phrases in the data set to reveal possible themes (Wright & Orbe, 2003). Recurring meanings were identified in the data set, which were then linked to broader ideologies relating to inclusive education. Following this, the third criterion of forcefulness identified the use of uppercase, italics, and various punctuation marks to reveal critical deeper insights. After analysis, the data set was verified by the participants and the emergent themes were selected and aligned with the research questions in each phase.

Ethics are norms that guide researchers to conduct their research in an acceptable and appropriate manner (Resnik, 2011). Such norms ensure that the research participants are protected from potential harm. In keeping with the university requirements, ethical clearance was received from the university before the data generation began. The researcher ensured that participants were aware that their involvement was voluntary and informed consent was signed prior to the start of the research phase. Participants were ensured of their anonymity, confidentiality, and safety from potential harm. Due to prolonged interaction between research participants, PALAR requires added dimensions of ethical considerations. Throughout the two research cycles, the co-researchers were consulted, and the development of the project remained transparent (Cohen et al., 2018; Wood, 2020) and open to suggestions. Decisions informing the research processes and progression through the cycles were decided on collaboratively by all members.

Findings

The following section presents the findings in the form of selected written narratives from journal reflections. Also included, are some excerpts from purposeful conversations in which participants built on each other's ideas, resulting in a collaborative meaning making.

Diversity as a Strength

In Cycle 1, some of the research participants problematised diversity as a challenge in their classrooms. Their responses reflected that they perceived themselves to be ill equipped when children had varied needs, thus their understandings of diversity required revisiting. For example, one participant expressed feelings of frustration when a child diagnosed with hyperactivity was unable to follow routine. She stated during the purposeful conversations:

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. (Research Participant 1)

Participants in the study felt they were ill equipped to manage a group of children with diverse needs because teaching children from diverse backgrounds requires specialised skills. The use of the word "normal" in the above narrative aligns with a deficit model in which difference is seen as a pathology requiring labelling and placement in a separate facility (Swart & Pettipher, 2016). However, inclusion is about accepting that *all* children are different and unique. Diversity exists in many forms, and participants were referring mainly to the inclusion of children with special educational needs. Therefore, participants felt that acknowledging diversity requires specialised skills. For instance,

Participant 5 stated that including diversity was “difficult, as I am not qualified to be an inclusive teacher.” Research Participant 6 echoed these sentiments during purposeful conversations regarding the absence of required skills to embrace diversity, and she preferred to avoid certain topics because school managers and parents were not happy for teachers to address sensitive issues of exclusion based on gender or sexual orientation:

Being a newly qualified teacher, I have little knowledge of diversity and I feel that something I say may offend certain groups—so I stay away from these topics that may cause problems with school managers or fussy parents.

After the group’s collaborative learnings and reflections, participants held a more positive view of diversity as something that was a norm rather than a deviation. Research Participant 2 reflected on her personal experiences of diversity as a strength (Christenson, 2021). The diversity in her family was not something that was easily accepted by society, and she was able to move past this and see the value of coming from a culturally diverse family background. In Cycle 2, she remarked in her journal:

I see that the diversity in my family allows for me to be able to have a better understanding of those around me. My cultural background is diverse as my grandfather was Muslim and my grandmother a Hindu. This not only encourages me to respect all religions but also teaches me about them both. These life experiences help me to understand and accept differences in people. (Research Participant 2)

Research Participant 3 reflected that the presence of diversity at an early age created greater respect for people who are different and added, “when the children get to play and learn with children who are different, from a young age they learn how to behave in a respectful way to others.” Research Participant 6 reflected in her journal:

Everyone is different and each one brings different strengths to the table . . . yes discussions about acceptance are very important and to make children understand that no one person is the same. Like a box of crayons, each colour is different—we all complement each other and that is what makes the world a better place. Having posters and charts as visuals [are good], but communicating about diversity is important.

Also in Cycle 2, participants demonstrated a deeper understanding of diversity. Suggesting that diversity exists in homogenous groups, Research Participant 1 remarked that “even among a group of people who look similar, we still have differences: differences in language, ability, or religions.” Hence, in Cycle 2, participants seemed to have a clearer understanding of diversity, and expressed a need to communicate about diversity.

Inclusion is a Collaborative Effort

When people of diverse backgrounds collaborate with each other, they build positive relationships and learn to communicate effectively, show greater empathy to others, and work towards a common purpose. Following the analysis of the baseline questionnaire, it was apparent that there was a lack of collaboration between ECD centres and their community. Participants indicated that parents had no say in deciding the policies of their centres and that ECCE teachers, assistants, and leaders seldom worked collaboratively. Furthermore, parents were discouraged from visiting centres, except for meetings to discuss the child’s progress, and community members were not involved in the life of their centres. In terms of building relationships among staff, all co-researchers remarked on the lack of team-building exercises to enhance staff relationships. The above messages from participants

suggested a need for purposeful relationship-building activities to foster an inclusive learning space. Echoing this, Research Participant 3 stated during conversations, “I need to learn more about how to teach in a way that is inclusive and how to involve the community and family in the centre.”

In Cycle 2, following their learnings and reflections, participants suggested that schools function as a microcosm of a larger society (Brown & Sekimoto, 2017) and the early learning environment in ECCE is an initial space for building partnerships with parents and community. Research Participant 4 provided the following reflection in her journal on how creating partnerships with families enabled her to understand the child better:

It helps us to do our jobs better. Knowing those around us helps us to understand them better. Building relationships with families helps us to know more about a child and what background they come from. This can assist us in identifying any problems that occur during learning, we would be able to tell if the distracted nature is due to problems at home or a learning difficulty.

Participants also alluded to the importance of collaborative problem solving and the need for parents to take the lead in fund raising initiatives:

Building relationships creates an atmosphere where if there is a problem, you are not alone because there are others that can assist. Having relationships can assist the centre in so many ways, e.g. fund-raising events or if the centre needs sponsors, etc. (Research Participant 1)

In addition, children can be developed holistically if they are given opportunities to work with others. Research Participant 3 remarked:

We can improve our relationships using group work. This encourages a child’s social development. It is important for children to work with others so we can observe their social skills and if they are selfish or not. We can use that to teach them sharing and good social skills.

Just as children are encouraged to work with their peers, participants felt that teachers also needed to make a concerted effort to build relationships of trust with the children. In this way, the ECCE learning space becomes a safe space for children. Aligned with this, Research Participant 2 stated during conversations that:

We can build relationships with children by making them feel safe by not pointing fingers or shouting at them, but taking the time to hear and help them.

Furthermore, teachers themselves cannot work in silos because teamwork is an essential aspect of the profession. Participant 4 noted during conversations:

Our co-workers can also assist us to be better educators. They can share ideas that work in their classrooms, as well as what does not work well for them. This will in turn better our teaching methods.

Hence, in Cycle 2, participants seemed to have a clearer understanding of the need to work collaboratively with other people in order to create an inclusive learning space.

Learning through Play

The objective of schoolification focuses on achieving school readiness as a central activity of ECCE (Ebrahim et al., 2019). However, learning through play is an integral part of a quality early years programme with many benefits—including the creation of an inclusive learning environment. It is through play that young children learn and develop, as well as make sense of the world around them. However, research participants indicated that outdoor activities get in the way of real learning and raised concerns about play distracting the children from “real” learning. Following learnings in Cycle 2, research participants challenged this false dichotomy of play versus learning.

In Cycle 2, the ALS stated the importance of a flexible approach in the early years. For instance, Research Participant 5 mentioned that:

The National Curriculum Framework is a flexible curriculum. In my opinion, it is inclusive as children learn at their own pace through play. The ELDA's are a guide for teachers and teachers may integrate their themes into the different development areas. The age groups are a guide for the teacher and the teacher must work according to the children she teaches. All children are not at the same level—even those who are the same age.

Play was also identified as a means for children to develop in all domains, and teachers were able to ascertain the child's emotional status and identify red flags:

I believe learning through play is vital. A simple game for example, if a child is playing and cooking, they are learning how to count because they think about what ingredients they are going to use. The teacher will be able to pick up children's emotions and behaviour while they play. If a child is playing with a doll and she keeps hitting the doll, it can be a warning sign and there is an opportunity for the teacher to learn more about the child. (Research Participant 7)

The importance of play was also echoed by Participant 5 in her journal:

Learning through play is an important part of a child's early development. Playing helps young children's brains to develop and for their language and communication skills to mature. They [play] teach[es] young children about communication, develop their motor skills and help with problem-solving. For me, play is the work of children. It consists of those activities performed for self-amusement that have behavioural, social and psychomotor rewards. It is child-directed, and the rewards come from within the individual child; it is enjoyable and spontaneous and should be lots of fun, which encourages children to learn through their senses.

Research Participant 8 emphasised how play assisted teachers in identifying strengths and weaknesses of learners during their observation of play, and highlighted the importance of play in the development of self-confidence of the children:

Play is important for a child's development, as it is through that, that a teacher can recognise a child's strength and weakness. Play also helps with the confidence of a child. Play is how children learn.

In addition, teachers can intervene during fantasy play or role-play to find teachable moments to challenge stereotypes and bias:

The teacher can use the fantasy play to teach inclusive education by encouraging girls to play with cars or commonly known “boys toys” and encourage boys to play cooking or with dolls and ensure that you tell them it is okay for them to play with the toys. (Research Participant 4)

During play, children choose their activities and this is an important aspect of respecting the child’s agency. Research Participant 2 explained during conversations:

Children feel that they own their learning when they have a chance to choose their own games to play and make their own rules. By doing that, children will feel a sense of ownership.

Hence, in Cycle 2, participants seemed to have a deeper understanding of the need for a play-based curriculum that respects the autonomy of children.

Discussion of Findings

The above discussion identified three salient findings that are relevant to understanding inclusion using a posthumanist perspective. The discussion that follows attempts to synthesise the results from Cycles 1 and 2, the theoretical underpinning, and the PALAR design in order to understand posthumanist perspectives of inclusion in the early learning environment.

Diversity as an Expectation and Strength

The original foundation of inclusion has always been humanist given that educational institutions are expected to embrace a shared humanity (Naraian, 2020). However, in recent years, these concepts of human rights and equality have come under scrutiny as the concept of *human* is aligned with dominance over other beings that inhabit the planet, including those who are considered subhuman due to marginalised identity markers. With the hegemonic Vitruvian man at the centre of creation in our history, we see the *inhumane* effects of colonisation, patriarchy, and slavery by those who dominate. Moving away from humanism, diversity needs to be reconceptualised as the rule—similar to the box of crayons mentioned by Participant 6 where every colour has a critical role in creating the picture. Every different crayon makes a unique contribution to the overall picture. In a similar way, diversity needs to be embraced and society needs to thrive on difference rather than similarity. In Cycle 1, most participants initially regarded diversity as a deviation from the norm and therefore saw it as a challenge and problem in their learning environments. Following their discussions and collaborative learning, personal experiences were shared that aligned with posthumanist beliefs of diversity in a more optimistic light (Barden, 2020). In this posthumanist perspective, human identity is constantly in flux and the perfect representation of the ideal human specimen in the Vitruvian concept of White, bourgeoisie, male, and able-bodied, is challenged (Braidotti, 2013).

Rethinking the Individualism and Superiority of the Human

A humanist perspective is based on the premise that the human is an autonomous and capable individual who is able to navigate through life successfully, based on their individual capabilities. A posthumanist perspective however gives credit to the relationships that are fostered while the human attempts to navigate through life. The “post” indicates a rethinking of the individualism and superiority of the human in our worldly relations (Keeling & Lehman, 2018, p. 5). Similarly, in Cycle 1, the narratives were centred on individualism because parents were not encouraged to make meaningful contributions to the running of the centre. Managers and teachers were in superior positions as policy makers, whereas parents were invited as mere guests on certain occasions. Following the learning and

collaborative discussions, participants highlighted a change by focusing on building relationships between children, with families and communities, and by networking with colleagues. Posthumanist thinking emphasises not just the interconnectedness of people with nature and animals, but codependency and symbiotic relationships with fellow human beings. Thus moving away from individualism—da Vinci’s Vitruvian man therefore no longer belongs at the centre of the universe (Braidotti, 2013). A posthumanist thinker understands that they are part of a bigger picture, accepts their individual roles, but also interacts with others in a way that leads to the greater good and sustainability of everyone and everything. This perspective would signify the fostering of interaction between all stakeholders and the fostering of relationships of trust, irrespective of differences in the early learning space. Aligned with the beliefs of collectivism, the PALAR research design emphasises relationship building among participants, epistemic democracy that values the knowledge created by practitioners in the field, as well as a collaborative meaning-making.

Recognition of the Posthuman Child

Posthumanism calls for teachers to adopt a pedagogy that seeks a shift from didactic teaching practices, disruption of what counts as knowledge and authority of the teacher as the knowledge giver, and a shift in power relationships in the learning space. Here, the child is an active thinker and a resourceful constructor of knowledge (Murriss, 2019). Cycle 1 conceptualised the *becoming* child as a passive recipient of knowledge, controlled by adults and the requirements of the curriculum to develop cognitively and to become ready for school—in opposition to the *being* child. The becoming child was constructed as lacking or incomplete, due to age discrimination. This concept of age discrimination is challenged by ideas of the posthuman child (Murriss, 2019). Cycle 2 however emphasised the being child as an active participant who is fully human and able to own their learning by interacting in an assemblage of varied play activities. The posthuman child is therefore capable of learning through play and taking charge as an active enquirer. This child is able to make choices and develop the agency to take control of their own learning. Deconstructing the false dichotomy of play versus learning therefore aligns with posthuman constructions of early childhood identity because play *is* learning in the early years. During play, the child makes sense of the world, and important values are learnt regarding difference. In this posthuman worldview, standardisation cannot exist because the child’s individuality is valued. Given that learning is a complex process, the child may select their own path during play in keeping with a rhizomatic learning perspective (Murriss, 2019). It follows that teachers, even with differentiated instruction, activities, and assessment, may still be unable to accommodate the individual needs, interests, and contexts of each individual child. In keeping with these ideas of a rhizomatic curriculum, the outcomes of PALAR are difficult to predict because they are the product of a collaborative meaning-making controlled by the participants rather than the researcher. PALAR moves away from traditional research and aligns with the posthuman perspective because the research participants are autonomous beings capable of constructing valuable knowledge that is relevant in their contexts.

Conclusion

The first research objective informed the first cycle and aimed to explore the state of inclusion prior to the research and learnings in this project. Findings suggest that participants needed to revisit their ideas regarding diversity, and needed to encourage relationship building and create opportunities for children to play more. The second research objective aimed to create a more inclusive learning space by addressing these concerns. Posthumanist perspectives offer valuable insights into inclusion in ECCE because they allow a reconceptualisation of diversity as a strength, the value of collectivism over individuality in the journey to inclusion, and emancipate the child as an active agent in their learning. From a researcher’s perspective, posthumanism highlights the fluidity of the concept of inclusion given

that I remain engaged in a process of continually seeking new ways of becoming inclusive. As stated by Naraian (2020, p. 29) “the potentially liberating affordance of this approach is that it leaves all bodies, including ourselves as researchers, open to a continual process of becoming.”

This research aimed to emancipate the voices of members of a marginalised sector in education. Aligned with posthuman philosophy, field workers became agents and solved problems that affect their lives. However, PALAR research requires a great deal of time and effort compared to regular qualitative approaches like interviews or focus group discussions. This research design requires commitment and buy-in from participants at the outset. With global imperatives to improve the sustainability of learning and movements towards enhancing collective responsibility towards the greater good of all humanity, animals, and nature, the posthuman perspective requires greater engagement and scholarship in studies on inclusion.

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