



Investigating critical citizenship education within primary school art curriculum

**Authors:**

Monique Putter¹ 
Elmarie Costandius¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Visual Arts,
Faculty of Arts and Social
Sciences, Stellenbosch
University, Stellenbosch,
South Africa

Corresponding author:

Elmarie Costandius,
elmarie@sun.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 05 June 2023
Accepted: 13 Sept. 2023
Published: 14 Dec. 2023

How to cite this article:

Putter, M. & Costandius, E.,
2023, 'Investigating critical
citizenship education within
primary school art
curriculum', *South African
Journal of Childhood
Education* 13(1), a1385.
[https://doi.org/10.4102/
sajce.v13i1.1385](https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v13i1.1385)

Copyright:

© 2023. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

Background: Visual art at school can create a learning environment where learners can learn, reflect and express opinions on critical citizenship and social justice issues as an informal modality that draws on different skills and allows for expression of thoughts and ideas in a medium other than words and numbers. A relevant issue in South Africa is the need to create a sense of citizenship to help South Africans to engage with and reflect on the country's complex colonial and apartheid history.

Aim: The aim of this study was to engage primary school learners in critical citizenship and social justice education to determine how this can deepen their conceptions and to communicate these through an art project.

Setting: A primary school in the Western Cape.

Methods: This participatory action research (PAR) study was designed for learners to engage with critical citizenship through project-based learning at a primary school in Cape Town, South Africa. Learners investigated critical citizenship by creating folktales as a narrative for their artwork.

Results: Primary school learners' conceptions of citizenship progressed from a general understanding of what citizenship means during the start of the PAR to a much deeper and personal experience of belonging, caring and connecting at the end of the PAR. The use of folktales, digital storytelling and visual art was effective in creating a message about citizenship that the learners practically experienced and valued.

Conclusion: The creative process and artistic expression deepened the learners' understanding and engagement of critical citizenship and social justice. The reflections on the individuals' and the group's learning experiences revealed that critical citizenship education could influence learners' conceptions and interpretations of folktales with a socio-political message.

Contribution: This research contributes to critical citizenship education and curriculum development.

Keywords: critical citizenship; social justice education; South African art education; folktales; storytelling; digital storytelling; visual art education; citizenship art.

Introduction

South Africa has undergone many political and socio-political changes over the last few decades that have affected South Africans' sense of belonging and their understanding and experiences of citizenship. The eradication of the formal structures of apartheid did not create a distinct description of what it means to be a citizen of South Africa (Hammett & Staeheli 2013:309). The diversity of South Africans in terms of culture, language, history, religion and race has contributed to its complexity and uniqueness. The transition in South African history from authoritarianism to the advent of democracy in 1994, the struggle against apartheid and a complete break with the past have led to all South Africans having access to the rights of citizenship (Soudien 2016:584). However, the state of the country remains unequal, and all South Africans are not able to realise these differentially distributed benefits preventing South African from relying on a developed and established citizenship (Soudien 2016:586). Seroto (2012:37) wrote that South Africa needs a new sense of citizenship that transcends racist policies of apartheid and achieves new virtues of self-respect, fairness towards others and social justice, which in 2023 is still not defined. Citizenship is at the centre of a democratic political society (Ramphele 2001:1). A strong citizen identity motivates people to participate actively within the political community (Christiano & Sameer 2022). Educating learners about citizenship at school will enable them to see themselves and others in society as citizens with legal rights and responsibilities (Osler & Starkey 2003:252).

Read online:

Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

Learners must learn how their citizenship affects the wider community and that they are responsible for creating a peaceful world that protects human rights and creates democratic societies. Educators can accomplish this by sharing knowledge, teaching valuable skills and creating the right attitudes to be more tolerant of people in our local and global community (Osler & Starkey 2003:252). Art can facilitate this conversation as a physical medium to express conceptions and as a subject that allows and encourages freedom of expression.

Research questions, study aims and study objectives

The main research question addressed in this study was:

What are primary school learners' conceptions of citizenship and how do they express these in a visual art project?

The sub-research questions were:

1. What do these conceptions of primary school learners reveal about the immediate teaching and learning and broader context?
2. What do these learners in contemporary society feel are important aspects of citizenship in South Africa?

The aim of this research is to investigate primary school learners' conceptions of citizenship and how they show it in a visual art project. The objectives are to analyse these conceptions within the broader context of South African society, to expose learners to learning experiences of critical citizenship that foster a sense of citizen identity that can contribute to the holistic development of these learners and to identify how critical citizenship can contribute to curriculum development of visual art at primary school level.

Literature review

What follows is a discussion of different learning perspectives, storytelling and digital storytelling in art education, as well as social justice education and critical citizenship as the emergent theoretical perspective of this research study.

Human learning

Understanding how humans learn is essential to how educators plan and organise the learning environment. Not all learning occurs in the same way and empowered educators understand that being aware of different perspectives on human learning makes education more effective. Some of these perspectives are discussed in this section.

Constructivist perspective

The constructivist perspective in education describes learning taking place in learner-centred situations and is experienced through relationships and problem solving to create structures of thinking and, ultimately, constructs of knowledge. The process of gaining new knowledge is

ongoing, and learners play an active and engaging role in this process (Doolittle & Tech 1999:1). Aubrey and Riley (2016:7) refer to Dewey's emphasis on the importance of creating a community at school that resembles real life where learners can participate, practise and play, giving them democratic experiences that could later inform their role in society. Schools with undemocratic organisations affect educators and learners alike and refuse to evolve with contemporary social life; this leads to differences and failings of the mind, growth and extension of democratic thinking in real life after school (Dewey 1903:193). Applefield, Huber and Moallem (2001:39) write about Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* as describing the effectiveness of social interaction of group work contributing to the process of learning where another member of the group holds a higher level of understanding of the given task, which is shared amongst the group. The zone of proximal development is considered as the gap between the development that is governed by a learner's own problem solving and the potential development that is governed by problem solving under the guidance of an educator or collaboration with other learners (Vygotsky 1978:86). Educators who dictate and determine learning, content and subject matter restrict the intelligence of learners, labelled by Dewey (1903:196) as *the imprisoning of the spirit*. According to Aubrey and Riley (2016:6), Dewey emphasises that the educator takes on the role of a facilitator who motivates learners to actively engage with content. Educators must create conducive environments to establish connections between various learning experiences and endorse problem-solving skills that could be applied in other settings in the outside community (Aubrey & Riley 2016:9).

Situative perspective

The situative perspective in learning is grounded in continual participation in communities of practice where individuals' contributions and interactions develop their identity and growth (Greeno & MMAP Group 1997:97). Conception and meaning emerge within the situation from inquiry, reflection and evaluation of the community practice and the individual's experience of the activity (Greeno & MMAP Group 1997:97). Through participation, we learn to think and engage in learning communities (Greeno & MMAP Group 1997:97). These communities encompass histories, assumptions, cultural values, social rules and relationships, which are further influenced by resources, for example technology, language and visual aids (Fenwick 2001:34).

Knowledge cannot be transferred, but can be reused when transformed and reinvented to be adapted to a new setting (Fenwick 2001:35). This is evident when learners are participating meaningfully and expanding or creating new structures of thought based on their learning experience. Educators are also present in the learning experience – reflection and evaluation are continuous as a negotiation of how to facilitate the activity. In this experience, the educator is a facilitator as well as a learner by being conscious of how learners engage with the activity and learning how to make

adaptions to the conditions within the situation so that learning is optimised. However, analysing or 'reading' learners' responses could be challenging because of various possible barriers, for example cultural, social and language differences and the unpredictability of human behaviour. Conversing with learners and asking them to share their thoughts and frustrations about the learning experience could guide this process.

Enactivist perspective

The enactivist perspective of experiential learning relies on cognition and the environment experienced together (Fenwick 2001:47). Cognition in enactivism results from the information in the learning environment being transformed and manipulated into structures of understanding (Rowlands 2013:303). Like the situated perspective, knowledge and information are not seen as something to hold and consume on their own, but as something to enact or embody within the experience (Fenwick 2001:47). The context cannot be separated from the experience, and the individuals involved in the learning experience change the dynamics through participation, adaption and response, which lead to learning, for example a conversation where different opinions are discussed, responded to and acted upon, leading the direction of the conversation organically (Fenwick 2001:47).

Enactivism focuses on learning through changes in complex systems in the learning experience situated within larger systems that create disturbances in cognition through feedback loops (Fenwick 2001:48). The focus is not on the parts of the learning experience, for example objects, experiences, community or movement, but rather on the relationships between these components in a complex system (Fenwick 2001:48). A complex system changes understanding of what is acceptable conduct in that situation that serves a particular outcome and has various possible responses – cognition occurs in these possibilities of unpredictable shared action (Fenwick 2001:49). Educators also play the role of story maker to help find meaning from the interactions of the participants and to draw attention to the disturbances in complex systems that lead to learning (Fenwick 2001:49). As interpreters, educators help make sense of the patterns emerging among these complex systems (Fenwick 2001:49).

Storytelling and digital storytelling

Storytelling is an ancient tool to promote learning filled with information that is communicated and organised; digital storytelling is the art of exploring various media using technology innovatively and effectively for individual and personal expression (McLellan 2006:26). The main idea of digital storytelling is to tell stories that are based on real life, are meaningful to the content creator and resonate with the audience (McLellan 2006:26). Stories endure, they help to make sense of something, they are familiar to us as a way of presenting information and can help in reconstructing

mental models through rhetoric, dramatic means, appealing to the emotions of a person to reconceptualise and recontextualise individual thinking patterns (McLellan 2006:27). When we experience stories, we put ourselves into the narrative and negotiate our feeling and responses, we empathise with characters and we can internalise injustices. Asking learners to tell stories is asking them to create narratives of their own and a world for this narrative to live in. Stories reveal patterns, connections and solutions and digital media captures, archives and reimagines them in a flexible and accessible way to share with others (McLellan 2006:27). Art is a medium that can be used to tell our stories; the meaning and significance are different when different people, belonging to other cultures, view it (Peralta 2010:25). With art, the artist transports the viewers on a journey that does not only entertain them, but also makes them reason about morality, judgements, cultural memories, histories and lessons learned in life (Peralta 2010:25). Art can help explain ourselves to others and in turn can help us understand others, because it shows beliefs, conceptions, desires, dreams and experiences to build a community (Peralta 2010:25). The links between art education, art making, storytelling, digital creation and creating a sense of community are beautifully interwoven (Peralta 2010:25).

In an African context, storytelling is knowledge making – a transference of culture and a valuable resource for many African cultures (Chimbo, Van Biljon & Renaud 2018:1). Storytelling traditions in contemporary society are most prevalent in folktales; the nature of these stories is educational and layered with teachings on values, morals, ethics and leadership (Dodd 2021:77). Folktales tell so much about cultures; they explore how the world is or was (Goldberg 1986:163). Research indicates that the focus of current narrative and digital storytelling in Africa is on important health and social issues to give direction, promote specific values and encourage social transformation (Cancel 2013:91–92; Dodd 2021:72). An example of storytelling being used in South Africa is a project in which storytelling in health clinics across the Limpopo province aimed to decrease stigmas regarding HIV and AIDS within local communities (De Jong et al. 2010:382). The findings indicated that storytelling was important in eradicating these stigmas (De Jong et al. 2010:382). Jirata (2011:269) highlights another use of storytelling in the African continent in how African parents, akin to other parents globally, teach their children conventional methods to be able to successfully socialise in the community through the verbal art of folktales, where these tales are known to overstate skills, morality and values that guide them. Passing on folktales from generation to generation teaches survival skills, cultural norms, cultural practices and values (Jirata 2011:269). When learners engage with folktales, they can reflect on the morals and values of past generations; they get to think about social complexities critically and how they relate to their environments (Jirata 2011:269). Young people can actively create and change society by examining their traditional identity and merging it with their contemporary context (Jirata 2011:271).

Social justice and critical citizenship in education

Social justice education teaches learners to recognise patterns and behaviours of oppression in the community and within themselves, which helps them to develop the critical skills to cultivate a sense of responsibility to reject and change them (eds. Adams, Bell & Griffin 2007:2). This is a complex process that requires the analysis and definition of oppression and the recognition of it historically, culturally and in society to be able to address it effectively (eds. Adams et al. 2007:2). This does not occur by simply covering content in a lesson, but by discussing it continuously, with educators challenging learners to deal with these conceptions in different ways and revisiting these themes again on a deeper level as the learners become older.

The problem of social justice in education revolves around how educators teach and what they teach, as well as the frameworks of their perceptions of social justice (eds. Adams et al. 2007:15). Active learning and interactive pedagogy have been implemented in education, but the actual scope, strategies and approaches can be overwhelming to many educators. Educators need to be empowered and helped to engage with these valuable resources. Adams et al. (eds. 2007:2) refer to Freire's 'praxis', which emphasises the importance of literature and theory. Praxis is an interactive and historical process shaped by theory, and the approach to social justice in education requires an emphasis on theoretical sources (eds. Adams et al. 2007:2). Theory frames our intentions, and the way we apply them helps us make decisions about what and how we do things (eds. Adams et al. 2007:2). Theory aids us in being conscious of our perceptions as historical subjects who learn from the past and attempt to overbridge them through praxis (eds. Adams et al. 2007:2).

Learning through folktales passed on from previous generations preserves cultural and traditional norms and through this authority, educators are showing behaviour as examples to learners and imparting them with knowledge on how to take responsibility for themselves and those in their community. Compared to Freire's approach, this approach does not focus on theory and literature, but rather on values and tradition to create a sense of responsibility towards social injustice. However, in both these perspectives, educators need to recognise that political processes and social control within theory and authority can be present. If not critically engaged with, the dominating hegemony and social structures at play could influence how we teach, learn and perceive knowledge if not critically engaged with. It is also important to look at our educators' frameworks of perception of social justice in a traditional sense combined with current issues to learn from the past and recognise possible oppression in our current situation. Social identity and cognitive development models are important parts of social justice education to facilitate intervention and change by focusing on the dynamics of oppression on a personal and social level (eds. Adams et al. 2007:16). We achieve this when we address differences in social identity and different levels of mindfulness and give credit to that which our

learners already know and understand (eds. Adams et al. 2007:16).

Education prepares young learners for their participation as citizens in society (Veugelers & de Groot 2019:14). Furthermore, citizenship in education develops learners' identity formation (Veugelers & de Groot 2019:14). The main concept of critical citizenship in education is learning about the legal rights and responsibilities people have in combination with how people form part of a community and the larger global community (Veugelers & de Groot 2019:14). Critical citizenship investigates the different perspectives on what people consider as acceptable behaviour or good citizenship and how these ideas are different to different people (Veugelers & de Groot 2019:14). Moreover, it becomes even more significant when exploring what makes people have different conceptions of citizenship for example cultural differences, ideology, moral belief systems, socio-political convictions.

Citizenship education applied in schools may take many different forms such as an abstract application of critical thinking or critical pedagogy, which advocates for political emancipation through interaction (Johnson & Morris 2010:77). Reform attempts such as offering learners new subjects at school and multi-cultural topics within the known curriculum are some of the ways citizenship education has been implemented in learning (Johnson & Morris 2010:77). However, what it means to be a good citizen has changed throughout times. Previously, good citizenship was built around patriotism, common identity and being loyal to the nation-state; now it is centred around multiculturalism and shared values for example kindness, tolerance and human rights (Johnson & Morris 2010:77). It is imperative that all people, no matter how diverse, can live together democratically and peacefully (Johnson & Morris 2010:77). Being a 'critical' citizen in the global context means that our learners need to be able to learn how to be innovative, independent and creative within their educational environments to demonstrate these skills later on in life.

Educating learners about citizenship in and outside of school will enable them to see themselves and others in society as citizens with legal rights and responsibilities (Osler & Starkey 2003:252). As part of their education, learners must learn how their citizenship affects the wider community and that, as humans, we are responsible for creating a peaceful world that protects human rights and creates democratic societies. Educators can accomplish this by sharing knowledge, teaching skills and creating the right attitudes to be more tolerant of people in our local and global community (Osler & Starkey 2003:252). Our citizenship affects globalisation, and globalisation affects our citizenship. This needs to be part of learners' education if the hope is for them to make a valuable and positive contribution to the world ethically, politically and socially. Critical citizenship teaches learners to become actively involved in creating a socially just society.

Methods

The research approach, design and method are discussed below to give an overview of the methodology of this project.

Research approach

Qualitative empirical research was conducted where creative art projects showed the outcomes of the research question through grounded theory. The inductive approach was utilised, which means that theory results from research (Bryman 2012:27).

Research design

The research design used in this study was participatory action research (PAR). The project created actions for the learners to address the research question(s) and the participants also benefitted from discovering answers to these questions through exploring and learning. Participatory action research relies on knowledge, experience, emotions, artistic expressions and performances that are non-objective and non-quantitative data to empower and benefit the participants (Reason 1994:12). This research method contributes to the creation of knowledge by non-academic communities about topics that are experienced by the participants in their own lives (Billies et al. 2010:278). This is important in the primary school context as learners at a young age can potentially develop their conceptions of citizenship and sense of responsibility as future adults participating in the South African community.

Research methods

Purposeful sampling was used to include the entire Grade 6 group (3 classes, 47 learners). Purposive sampling is not based on probability nor randomised but rather systematically sampling a case or participants relevant to the research questions that offer a variety of data to analyse (Bryman 2012:418). Theoretical sampling builds on grounded theory and is a form of purposeful sampling where the data are collected to generate theory and where the researcher collects, codes and analyses data, which informs what other data are to be collected next to create a theory (Bryman 2012:419). This was an appropriate sampling method because these Grade 6 learners are at the age where they can create conceptual artwork and are technically able to work with video art because of the foundations laid in grades 4 and 5. A consent form was filled out by the parents in which the research was explained. Another consent form before any data were collected was given and discussed with the learners to ask whether they would like to participate in the study.

Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), the analysis of the type of folktales the learners created from their research task, interpreting the final artistic projects the learners created about a chosen written folktale within a group and analysis of a reflection form given to the learners at the end of the PAR. The reflection form was based on the

research findings establishing whether the learners agreed with the researcher's observations and whether the PAR was effective in teaching critical citizenship. The PAR commenced in January 2023 at the start of the new academic year. The grade 6 learners participated in a folktale project taught over the first quarter (12 weeks). Data were recorded by digital note-taking of discussions, photographs of the drawings and text the learners created during their brainstorming phase, photographs of all the individual art created, the video artwork and the online reflection form were all recorded online and transcribed electronically. All of this was stored on a computer, backed up to a Microsoft OneDrive account, both password-protected. It was also backed up to an external hard drive that was locked away. The data was further analysed by using a Google Sheet to collate the information collected and identify major themes and conceptual development that ensured trustworthy data interpretation.

Limitations

Even though this research illuminates noteworthy findings on conceptions of citizenship of learners in South Africa, it does not represent all learners in South Africa or all learners in Cape Town. It elucidates conceptions of learners at the specific school where the data were collected.

Context of the study

The PAR took place at an affluent independent school in Cape Town with a non-denominational code of conduct and an integrated environment that is inclusive of all races with equal opportunities and friendship groups reflecting racial integration. The learners speak English to one another, and it is also the school's language of instruction. All learners possess iPads with access to the school's Wi-Fi for their daily learning requirements. The learners attending this school are not subjected to some of the challenges and injustices of learners attending schools in South Africa, for example not having access to sanitation, safe learning environments or basic learning resources at school. A mere 20% of South African public schools are fully functional (The FW de Klerk Foundation 2022:26). There are still pit latrines in over 1400 schools, less than 20% of schools have access to laboratories, only 30% have a library (The FW de Klerk Foundation 2022:27). There is a lack of safe learning environments nationwide – 411 gang-related crimes, 83 rapes and 19 murders all occurred within schools according to the second quarter crime statistics for 2022 to 2023 (The FW de Klerk Foundation 2022:27). This is relevant, as this research was about citizenship and the role we as citizens need to assume, and conceptions and perspectives of these could be different depending on the socio-economic reality and challenges of the learners.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Stellenbosch University Social, Behavioural and Education Research Ethics Committee. (REC: SBE). (No. 26663). The

research does not reveal the participants' race, gender or names, except that the school is an independent school in Cape Town. All data were collected anonymously to protect the learners' privacy. The data collection took place during the school day, where learners were observed using their art materials safely, as well as the safe and responsible use of the Internet when researching folktales. The researcher carefully navigated and guided the conversations to ensure that learners' discussions were age-appropriate and not harmful to their peers. Learners benefitted directly by participating in the research and by learning about critical citizenship, potentially affecting their sense of citizenship and belonging. The pedagogical practices ensured meaningful ways of engaging with the topic and building on their conceptual art-making skills. The possible result of this learning experience is valuable in potentially helping learners to establish a sense of belonging as South African citizens.

Implications and recommendations

The PAR was divided into four different phases answering the research questions. The main research question was: What are primary school learners' conceptions of citizenship and how do they express these in a visual art project?

The sub-research question was:

1. What do these conceptions of primary school learners reveal about the immediate teaching and learning and broader context?
2. What do these learners in contemporary society feel are important aspects of citizenship in South Africa?

Collaboratively brainstorming

During the FGD, learners were required to brainstorm and collaborate with group members about their conceptions of citizenship by drawing their ideas on cardboard, visually representing their thoughts. Learners were asked to divide themselves into groups of 3–5. Each group was influenced by its members, and similar drawings emerged from the same group, but with variations. Alternatively, individuals contributed to the group discussion by challenging themselves to express different perspectives on the concept of citizenship. Vygotsky's (1978:86) *zone of proximal learning* was seen in the social interactions of the groups in how some of the group members were sharing conceptions with the rest of the group that started a conversation about citizenship, where learners talked about real-life examples of citizenship, ignited other conceptions of citizenship related to the discussions or challenged conceptions and had group members exploring conceptions that were not yet mentioned. The conversations revealed how the learners who had a higher understanding of citizenship helped the rest of the group think of ideas and inspired those who were initially unsure what citizenship was to express their personal understanding, as they were building on those already-mentioned conceptions. These learners naturally came forward within the group dynamic as what is considered a 'higher understanding' was relative to how much or how

little the specific group sitting together already knew about citizenship. Learners were free to share their ideas democratically and were encouraged to respect one another's interpretations. When learners' active role requires them to critically consider one another, it creates effective citizenship in terms of tolerance and respect applied within the class community. Once the class started to share their ideas, it became clear that there was a constructivist expansion and adaptation of learning through play. Play transpired as drawing, doodling, telling stories and playing a role as a citizen in the art classroom.

Knowledge construction in the *situative* perspective takes place when learners actively integrate into the community of practice and participation influences knowledge in the learning environment (Pella 2011:109). The learning community in this brainstorming phase comprised learners with a myriad of histories, assumptions, cultural values, social rules and relationships. Learners learned by sharing ideas and thoughts, telling stories and linking conceptions where knowledge was a performance and an adaptation through participation and collaboration in the learning community. The *enactivist* perspective of experiential learning (similar to the situated perspective) views knowledge and information as not consumed independently, but enacted and embodied within the experience (Fenwick 2001:47). This was observed where cognition was enacted through participation, adaptation and responding, which led to learning, for example different opinions were discussed and acted upon, leading the direction of the conversation authentically. It was evident that the learners and the environment fused, and the interactions changed the participants' thought patterns.

This brainstorming phase showed what conceptions of primary school learners reveal about the immediate teaching and learning and broader context. Many groups were focused on the same themes in citizenship, reflecting the immediate teaching they have been subjected to as dominant themes at this particular school. One of the pillars of the school centres around being a responsible citizen, and the curriculum and planning are built around these pillars. The conceptions on citizenship that the learners shared during the brainstorming phase that were reflective of the immediate teaching and learning context at this particular school were: being a hard-working learner at school (which is awarded a merit in the merit system), not littering or throwing trash in the bin (which is a common theme in assembly and at the end of break times), people helping others cross the road (which they see daily because of the campus being split by a traffic light), and examples of bullying at school and online (learners have devices and access to gaming with online chatrooms). In one of the questions during the reflection at the end of the PAR, learners were asked whether they agreed that these initial themes reflected the teaching and learning environment at school, to which most of the learners agreed. This reveals that the conscious teaching of responsible citizenship at school can have an impact on learners' conceptions.

Many learners created drawings of crime-related images, for example a person holding a gun to someone's head, robbers, kidnappers, destruction of property and vandalism, revealing concerns about the South African reality and the effects of real-life issues to which the learners are subjected. When asked, the learners could give specific examples of these occurrences in the local community and in other parts of the country. When asked how they knew about it, they answered that they heard it on the news on television or radio, saw it on social media or heard their parents discussing it at home. They were capable of naming specific locations and specific events. This reveals that the broader context of children growing up in South Africa, being subjected to crime or crime-related occurrences, has an impact on their conceptions of citizenship answering sub-question 1: What do these conceptions of primary school learners reveal about the immediate teaching and learning and broader context? Furthermore, the current socio-political state of the country impacts learners' perceptions on what threatens their citizenship.

Self-exploration through research and social interaction

During the research phase, a research task required learners to independently research a folktale by finding one through the community, in books or on the Internet and recording themselves telling it. These recordings were shared among the grade as a learning opportunity through storytelling – learning occurred through sharing knowledge of folktales by building a database they could access and from which they could extract information. From this, they had to create their own story, a folktale, as an essay.

These folktales were created around the individuals' conception of citizenship. The point of this step was for the learners to create a clear message linked to their conception of citizenship before adding or creating any other storytelling elements or characters first. The learners were guided to express a theme in citizenship that was important to them personally, which could be communicated through storytelling and, eventually, through art. They were asked to focus on the South African context and think of all the discussions that have taken place about citizenship during their lesson. During this phase of the project, learners were taught about citizenship and democracy in South Africa during their History lessons – what democracy is, how it works in South Africa, when South Africa became a democracy, South Africa before 1994, voting and the role of political parties, the role of the South African Constitution, the role of Parliament, why rules and laws are important and what are individual rights and responsibilities. Learning about the South African context helped the learners think about citizenship and citizenship rights in the past and in the present.

Researching folktales taught them not only about existing folktales, but also about the significance of storytelling and the art of narrative to communicate a strong message that is

linked to their lives. The designing of curriculum around a learner's individual interests leads to personal development in constructivism (Aubrey & Riley 2016:8). When teaching critical citizenship education in a South African context, learning becomes personally relevant when learners are asked what their thoughts are, how they feel about citizenship and on which issues they would like to comment. This no longer teaches them to think about citizenship, but rather to actively participate in critical citizenship. In constructivism, educators must act as facilitators, motivating learners to actively engage with content and be part of the process of establishing connections between learning experiences and must support learners in using problem-solving skills to apply to different settings (Aubrey & Riley 2016:6). This was one of the most demanding aspects of this project: to facilitate in helping learners make these connections. When learners' observations were linked to real-life citizenship by the educator or peers, the learners were able to realise how citizenship takes on many forms through little actions in daily life.

In the situative perspective, knowledge is not simply transferred, but reused when transformed and reinvented to be applied to a new setting (Fenwick 2001:35). Learners expanding or creating new structures of thought based on their learning experience of folktales and citizenship led to meaningful participation. It was necessary to be conscious of how learners engaged with the activities and to learn how to adapt to the conditions in various situations to make learning more meaningful by conversing with the learners, showing an interest and asking them to share their thoughts and frustrations about the learning experience.

Creating meaningful stories by using the knowledge learners gained from the FGD, combining it with the folktale research and then linking it to their actions in conduct as citizens of a community resulted in cognition through feedback loops. Furthermore, in creating these stories, learners could explore various types of acceptable and unacceptable conduct within their made-up storylines which impacted the story's resolution. Cognition occurs in these possibilities of unpredictable shared action (Fenwick 2001:49). Enacting a role by creating a folktale, a made-up scenario with various possible outcomes developed by the learner, puts learners through a feedback loop of what it means to be an effective citizen.

Answering the sub-question 2: This research phase revealed what the learners feel are important aspects of citizenship in contemporary society in South Africa. The initial conceptions of citizenship in the FGD were being a hard-working learner at school, not littering or throwing trash in the bin, helping others cross the street, giving food to the hungry and helping the homeless and bullying. Seeing what type of folktales the learners created in their written essays, where they had made creative decisions to illustrate their conceptions of citizenship and focused their narratives on what they deemed as essential aspects of citizenship, revealed what these learners in

contemporary society feel are important aspects of citizenship in South Africa. The main themes about citizenship that were reoccurring in the folktales were being kind to others, showing respect, being reliable and responsible, treating people the way you want to be treated, working together to reach a common goal as a community, sharing resources, helping and supporting others, not only thinking of yourself, learning a lesson and showing remorse, realising your mistakes and then taking action to fix them or apologising to the affected characters and these characters then changing their actions and helping others without expecting anything in return. The implications are that the learners developed their conceptions by thinking about creating a thriving community starting with individuals taking action and responsibility without expecting any reward or incentive.

Compared to the initial conceptions revealed during the brainstorming phase, the learners progressed in thinking about citizenship on a deeper level. Initially, their conceptions were more focused on examples of citizenship illustrated through events or actions occurring in isolation or as individuals acting outside of a social situation within the brainstorming phase. The progression was seen where the conceptions of citizenship deepened to reflect on citizenship as having a direct impact on another person or group in a community within their own made-up folktales. Bullying, food insecurity and helping others without being asked remained dominant themes. Crime also remained a central theme. A new theme arose of characters playing hurtful pranks, which would lead to another character being either excluded, belittled or physically hurt. A quarter of all the learners depicting South African problems created stories where drought or water insecurity was central to the plot. When asked about it during their reflection, 9% of the group said that water insecurity was mentioned during a lesson; 20% of the group said they remembered the drought in Cape Town in 2018 and even though they were only in Grade 1, it had a significant impact on them; 30% said that water is needed for survival and suited the folktale theme; and 41% of the group said that there was mention of water insecurity in our country and people not having access to water on the current news. Therefore, it can be argued that conversations during lessons, real-life personal experiences, the real-life context of living in South Africa with communities who do not have access to water as well as learning about folktales have an impact on critical citizenship.

The creative process and artistic expression

Learners chose their own groups of 2–3 during the creative process phase and listened to one another's folktale essays. They were asked to consider one another's folktales, for example the lesson about citizenship, the potential visual elements attached to the folktale and the conception of citizenship that echoes the group's interests most effectively. Based on their discussions and opinions, they chose one of the folktales as the group's final folktale from which to create artwork. Thereafter, each individual group member was

asked to create an artwork to represent the folktale (by creating either a scene in the story or a character or an object from the story) with any art medium of their choice, for example sculpture, watercolour, sketch, digital drawing or painting, animation or collage. After creating this individual artwork, all artworks from the group were added together as one video clip (stills of the artworks or animated scenes) with a voiceover (the essay read out loud) and music that the group created to set the tone. It was important that each learner autonomously chose how they wanted to express themselves. How the learners chose the folktale for the group was done democratically; highlighting this to the learners illustrated another learning experience of critical citizenship.

Individual artistic expression is essential in getting learners to feel motivated in the visual art classroom and to embody and internalise critical thinking. The learners chose from a variety of art media to ensure individual expression and creative interpretations of the chosen folktale reflecting the constructivist approach of designing learning around individual interests. It was important that if the learner's own essay was not chosen, they still had the opportunity to create the artwork that they wanted to create which put the individual at the centre of the learning experience. This allows learners to experiment autonomously to construct knowledge through the creative process. Not only does this reiterate the value of the constructivist perspective, but it also shows the importance of visual art as a subject that values the opinions of learners and encourages critical thinking. Learners negotiating their conduct through social exchanges with one another and the environment, as well as participating, responding and improvising with different problems and practices in the learning community reflect the situative perspective (Fenwick 2001:36). All the group members were affected by each individual's artistic choices as they were creating one final product. Furthermore, group members were working together on a folktale that is a simulated situation based on real-life citizenship and how they interacted with the group affected all the group members.

Conscious reflection on the individual's and the groups' learning experience

The Grade 6 learners completed their folktale video artwork and shared it with learners in Grade 3 as their audience by sitting with them in the garden and playing their videos from their iPads. The Grade 3 learners were encouraged to ask questions and comment on the folktales, while the Grade 6 learners were encouraged to explain citizenship to the younger learners and link it with their video artwork. After this showcase, the Grade 6 learners were given a form to fill in as part of their reflection phase. The questions revealed the research findings throughout the entire project to give learners an opportunity to agree, build on or reject what has been observed. The learners could individually contribute and interact with the findings of the group and extract meaning from what the learning community had experienced. The questions were carefully designed and constructed to

establish the effectiveness of teaching critical citizenship and whether or not the project had an impact on the group. Some of the questions were also linked to the previous structures of the learners' understanding by mentioning again what surfaced during the FGD. From the situation of inquiry, reflection and evaluation of the community practice and the individual's experience of the activity, conception and meaning emerge (Greeno & MMAP Group 1997:97).

One of the questions in the reflection form asked the learners whether they would like to add any drawings, text or doodles to the posters they created at the start of the PAR (showing what they understood as citizenship initially in the brainstorming phase). In total, 86% of the learners said yes, indicating personal growth and development in conceptions of citizenship. The learners were asked whether they thought citizenship should be taught to all learners at South African schools, and the entire group answered yes, expressing how this would make a positive change everywhere. When asked whether they thought they understood citizenship and their role in society better now than before this project, 81% said yes and only 12% said no; the other 7% said they already knew much of what was covered. When asked whether they felt that they could talk about citizenship if someone asked them, only 12% said no. The learners were asked whether they thought folktales could be used to learn about citizenship and everyone answered yes.

The extent to which critical citizenship influenced how the learners interpreted folktales in general as well as their own chosen folktale for their art project, was significant. When the learners first learned about folktales, they could easily identify the lessons or morals to be learned but could not easily link it to citizenship. Citizenship, initially, was considered something outside of the learners. They did not realise that they were already citizens of South Africa, but rather considered adults as 'citizens'. It was emphasised that they are citizens, and the result of this was that they started to see how their actions now at school already had an impact on their citizenship in the larger South African community. Critical citizenship requires learners to be actively involved and not to sit back idly and wait for other people to create the society that they envision. The observation was that the content that was dealt with started to become more meaningful, personal and real. This was evident in how the learners interpreted their own folktale and the folktale that they chose for the art project. After revisiting the poster they created during the FGD at the end of the PAR, 86% of the group answered that they had ideas to add to the poster. This shows that the PAR experience had a direct impact on the conceptions of citizenship of these learners and that critical citizenship education led to deeper and more meaningful understanding and constructivist knowledge creation.

Investigating what primary school learners' conceptions of citizenship are and how they show it in a visual art project

revealed interesting findings in this PAR. Learners' conceptions were different in the various phases of the project, for example in the FGD, in their own written folktales and in the answers given during the reflection at the end of the project. These conceptions went from a general understanding of what citizenship means to a much deeper and personal experience of belonging, caring and connecting. Learners utilised new media and technology, digital storytelling and linking traditional and contemporary ways of making art to show these conceptions. They thoroughly engaged in this process, as technology speaks to the 21st-century digital native learner. Through their own folktales, learners were reconstructing mental models through rhetoric and dramatic means, appealing to the emotions of the viewer to reconceptualise and recontextualise individual thinking patterns. These stories created and shared with the Grade 3 learners put the viewer and the creator into the narrative to negotiate feelings and responses, to empathise with characters and to internalise injustices. Using folktales and visual art, learners could shape and build a message about citizenship that they value. They expressed and represented their significant reflections on life by threading them through art and storytelling. The reflection at the end of the project revealed that the PAR findings were accurate. Valid reflection leads to action, and when reflection and action on the world ensue through praxis, the world can be transformed (Freire 2005:68).

Conclusion

The PAR revealed that the immediate teaching and learning and broader context of the learner influenced conceptions of citizenship. The learners agreed during their reflection that their initial conceptions of citizenship were reflective of the dominant themes of citizenship at school and were being a hard-working learner at school, not littering or throwing trash in the bin, helping others cross the street, giving food to the hungry and helping the homeless and bullying. This is evidence of the impact of that which the school promotes and highlights in general on learners' conceptions of citizenship. Learners in the FGD also focused on crime and how this threatens citizenship, revealing that learners at this school are highly affected by South African crime and have an acute awareness of crime incidents in the country. Therefore, these learners' citizenship was directly affected by the broader South African community and indirectly by the crime-related incidents in the local community.

This research revealed that conceptions of citizenship in primary school learners could be developed in critical citizenship education. During the reflection at the end of the PAR, the learners showed that they had a deeper understanding of citizenship. The process they underwent, the conversations between the researcher and the learners throughout the various phases and the activities shaped around critical citizenship had a great impact on them. This is evident from their conceptions of citizenship changing and evolving from their initial conceptions at the start of the

project. Learners at the end of the project were better able to articulate their ideas and discuss their creative projects as examples of effective or ineffective citizenship.

Critical citizenship can be effectively illustrated in a conceptual art project through visual communication by primary school learners. The video artworks clearly showed conceptions of critical citizenship in the narratives and in the visual artworks. However, it is necessary for educators to guide and facilitate this process to optimise learning of artistic techniques and visual literacy to interpret ideas into visual art elements to communicate ideas effectively. These visual art projects were insightful and informative for future curricula development for critical citizenship at primary school level education. It created a framework that other educators can use to teach critical citizenship.

This research project uncovered a new learning perspective on how to facilitate critical citizenship teaching and learning and apply it in the classroom in an ongoing project, asking the learners to engage with critical citizenship through using art as a conduit for teaching socio-political topics. This perspective is called a *reflective learning community of continuous engagement*. Through the relationship between the learners and between the teacher and learners, problem-solving occurred through learner-centred interactions to develop new structures of understanding. Continual participation throughout this project created communities of practice where individual learners contributed and interacted with one another, which had an impact on the group's perceptions. Insightful interpretations of citizenship were shared during the reflection on the project where learners engaged with ideas together as a learning community, for example overall, the learners believed that citizenship should be taught to all learners in South Africa, understood citizenship and their role in society better now than before this project, agreed that folktales could be used to learn about citizenship and that topics such as citizenship could be shown in artwork. The messages about citizenship that were shown in the video artwork brought together and integrated learners' freedom to make creative choices in their creative projects within a learning community, resulting in greater engagement in learning critical citizenship with the overall main themes were treating people the way you want to be treated, working together, taking responsibilities for mistakes and helping others without expecting anything in return.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.P. is the first author and a masters student investigating critical citizenship education in a primary school context. E.C. is the supervisor of the study.

Funding information

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

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and available upon request from the corresponding author E.C. The data are not publicly available because of containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Disclaimer

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

References

- Adams, M., Bell, L.A. & Griffin, P. (eds.), 2007, *Teaching for diversity and social justice*, 2nd edn., Routledge, New York, NY.
- Applefield, J.M., Huber, R. & Moallem, M., 2001, 'Constructivism in theory and practice: Toward a better understanding', *The High School Journal* 84(2), 35–53.
- Aubrey, K. & Riley, A., 2016, *Understanding and using educational theories*, Sage, London.
- Billies, M., Francisco, V., Krueger, P. & Linville, D., 2010, 'Participatory action research: Our methodological roots', *International Review of Qualitative Research* 3(3), 277–386. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2010.3.3.277>
- Bryman, A., 2012, *Social research methods*, 4th edn., Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Cancel, R., 2013, *Storytelling in Northern Zambia: Theory, method, practice and other necessary fictions*, Open Book, Cambridge.
- Chimbo, B., Van Biljon, J. & Renaud, K., 2018, 'Visualization of African knowledge to embody the spirit of African storytelling: Principles, practices and evaluation', in H. Winschiers-Theophilus, I. van Zyl, N. Goagoses, D. Singh Jat, E.G. Belay, R. Orji, et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the Second African Conference for Human Computer Interaction: Thriving Communities*, vol. 48, pp. 1–2, Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), Windhoek, Namibia, December 03–07, 2018.
- Christiano, T. & Sameer, B., 2022, 'Democracy', in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, viewed 22 March 2022, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/democracy/>.
- De Jong, G., Vintges, M., Wijbenga, H. & Zeelen, J., 2010, 'Beyond silence and rumour: Storytelling as an educational tool to reduce the stigma around HIV/AIDS in South Africa', *Health Education* 110(5), 382–398. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09654281011068531>
- Dewey, J., 1903, 'Democracy in education', *The Elementary School Teacher* 4(4), 193–204. <https://doi.org/10.1086/453309>
- Dodd, J.G., 2021, 'Reclaiming inheritance: Enacting leadership in African storytelling contexts', *Journal of Leadership Studies* 14(4), 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21726>
- Doolittle, P.E. & Tech, V., 1999, *Constructivism and online education*, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg.
- Fenwick, T.J., 2001, *Experiential learning: A theoretical critique from five perspectives*, Five Perspectives Information Series No. 385, College of Education, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.
- Freire, P., 2005, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 30th anniversary edn., transl. M. Bergman Ramos, Continuum, New York, NY.
- Goldberg, C., 1986, 'The construction of folktales', *Journal of Folklore Research* 23(2/3), 163–176.
- Greeno, J.G. & MMAP Group, 1997, 'Theories and practices of thinking and learning to think', *American Journal of Education* 106(1), 85–126. <https://doi.org/10.1086/444177>
- Hammett, D. & Staeheli, L.A., 2013, 'Transition and the education of the New South African citizen', *Comparative Education Review* 57(2), 309–331. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669123>
- Jirata, T.J., 2011, 'Children as interpreters of culture: Producing meanings from folktales in Southern Ethiopia', *Journal of Folklore Research* 48(3), 269–292. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkres.48.3.269>
- Johnson, L. & Morris, P., 2010, 'Towards a framework for critical citizenship education', *The Curriculum Journal* 21(1), 77–96.

- McLellan, H., 2006, 'Digital storytelling: Bridging old and new', *Educational Technology* 46(5), 26–31.
- Osler, A. & Starkey, H., 2003, 'Learning for cosmopolitan citizenship: Theoretical debates and young people's experiences', *Educational Review* 55(3), 243–254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013191032000118901>
- Pella, S., 2011, 'A situative perspective on developing writing pedagogy in a teacher professional learning community', *Teacher Education Quarterly* 38(1), 107–125.
- Peralta, A., 2010, 'The ART of storytelling: The CO-CONSTRUCTION of cultural knowledge', *Art Education* 63(2), 25–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2010.11519058>
- Ramphele, M., 2001, 'Citizenship challenges for South Africa's young democracy', *Daedalus* 130(1), 1–17.
- Reason, P., 1994, 'Co-operative inquiry, participatory action research & action inquiry: Three approaches to participative inquiry', in N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, pp. 324–339, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Rowlands, M., 2013, 'Enactivism, intentionality, and content', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50(3), 303–316.
- Seroto, J., 2012, 'Citizenship education for Africans in South Africa (1948–1994): A critical discourse', *Yesterday & Today* 7, 63–84.
- Soudien, C., 2016, 'South Africa: The struggle for social justice and citizenship in South African education', in A. Peterson, R. Hattam, M. Zembylas & J. Arthur (eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook of education for citizenship and social justice*, pp. 571–592, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- The FW de Klerk Foundation, 2022, *Human rights report card 2022: The status of rights in the Bill of Rights during 2022*, pp. 1–34, viewed 02 September 2023, from https://fwdeklerk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/HRRC2022_compressed.pdf.
- Veugelers, W., & de Groot, I., 2019, 'Theory and Practice of Citizenship Education', *Education for Democratic Intercultural Citizenship*, 14–41.
- Vygotsky, L.S., 1978, *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.