

Repositioning Parents as Co-Educators: Culturally and Linguistically Situated Pedagogies for Inclusive Early Language Learning in South Africa

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ABSTRACT:

Parents play a fundamental role in children's early language learning, yet their pedagogical knowledge remains under-recognised within formal early childhood education, particularly in multilingual contexts. This study explores how parents enact culturally and linguistically situated pedagogies that support inclusive early language learning in South Africa. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Rogoff's Pedagogy-in-Participation, the study draws on qualitative interview data from six mothers of young children attending early childhood care and education centres in Tshwane, Gauteng. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. The findings show that mothers support children's learning through everyday interaction, including questioning, modelling, storytelling, songs, reading, repetition and encouragement. Mothers also use multilingual practices, including home-language communication and code-switching, while creating continuity between children's home experiences and early childhood learning. The findings position parents as active pedagogical agents rather than peripheral supporters of formal education. The study contributes to inclusive early childhood education by demonstrating how culturally and linguistically situated parental practices can support children's participation, communication and early language learning across home and educational contexts.

Keywords: Parents as co-educators; culturally and linguistically situated pedagogies; early language learning; multilingualism; inclusive early childhood education.

1. Introduction

Inclusive early childhood education requires more than children's physical access to educational settings. It also requires learning environments in which children's languages, cultural identities, relationships and ways of participating are recognised as resources for learning. This broader understanding of inclusion is particularly important during the early years, when language provides a foundation for communication, participation and subsequent learning. UNESCO (2021, 2025) emphasises that inclusive early childhood education should

respond to children's diverse backgrounds and that multilingual education can strengthen equitable participation when children's home languages are incorporated into learning. Language, therefore, is not simply a medium through which early education is delivered; it is part of the social and cultural context through which children experience belonging and participation.

Parents' contribution to early learning extends beyond participation in activities organised by educational institutions. Families develop knowledge of children's communication,

interests, learning preferences and participation through sustained everyday interaction. Contemporary family-engagement research increasingly calls for relationships in which families' knowledge and experiences are recognised as resources for children's learning rather than treating parental involvement as an extension of teachers' work (Demissie & Pearse, 2025). This strengths-based orientation is particularly important in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, where children's learning is shaped across home, community and educational contexts.

Recent research on multilingual family literacy provides further support for this perspective. Harris et al. (2025) demonstrate how family literacy practices can sustain children's home and community languages while creating opportunities for learning in English. Similarly, Zhang and Brown (2026) show that multilingual parents and children construct literacy experiences through oral language, visual resources, gestures and shared interaction, challenging narrowly monolingual understandings of early literacy. Hayes et al. (2026) likewise emphasise the contribution of home literacy environments to children's oral language and early literacy development. Together, this scholarship positions family practices as active sites of learning rather than simply supportive environments for formal education.

This perspective is particularly relevant in South Africa, where children often negotiate multiple languages across home and educational settings. Mahan et al. (2024) found that translanguaging can support communication and participation in multilingual preschool classrooms, while Xeketwana et al. (2025) demonstrate how families make deliberate language choices that maintain home languages while responding to the prominence of English in formal education. Sibanda and Tshehla (2025) similarly identify tensions associated with the movement from mother-tongue education towards English in a multilingual Gauteng township context. These studies suggest that children's linguistic experiences cannot be understood solely through

the language practices of educational institutions; families actively shape children's language repertoires and experiences.

Culturally responsive early childhood education provides an important conceptual connection between family knowledge, language and inclusion. Mahadew (2025) demonstrates that culturally responsive teaching can strengthen inclusion by connecting educational practices with children's cultural and community contexts. Harris et al. (2025) similarly argue for family-literacy approaches that sustain children's cultural and linguistic practices through reciprocal relationships between families and educators. These approaches shift attention from adapting families to institutional expectations towards creating educational environments that recognise and build upon the resources families already possess.

The literature therefore establishes the importance of family engagement, multilingualism, home literacy and culturally responsive practice, but a more specific gap remains. Less attention has been given to how parents themselves enact pedagogical practices through everyday communication, multilingual interaction, shared literacy activities and connections with early childhood settings, and how these practices can be understood as resources for inclusive early language learning. The present study addresses this gap by examining mothers' accounts of how they support children's learning across home and educational contexts. It therefore shifts the focus from parental involvement as participation in institutional education towards parents as co-educators whose culturally and linguistically situated practices contribute to children's communication, participation and learning.

2. Methodology

This article draws on selected interview data from an original qualitative study that investigated parents' knowledge and actions in early childhood education. The original study adopted a qualitative case-study design and sought to understand parents' experiences and the meanings they attached to their knowledge and

actions in relation to their children's early learning (Yin, 2018). The present article uses relevant data from that study to examine parents' pedagogical practices, language and communication, and engagement with children's learning across home and early childhood contexts. The use of selected interview data enables a focused examination of parental pedagogical agency and the contribution of culturally and linguistically situated practices to early language learning. The study was conducted in the natural environments of participating families, allowing parents to describe their experiences within the context of everyday family life.

The participants comprised six mothers who had children from birth to four years attending an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centre in an urban township area of Tshwane, Gauteng Province, South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to identify parents who had one or more children attending the participating ECCE centre and who were available to participate in the study. The research records indicate that the participating mothers were between 27 and 58 years of age. Participants are identified through codes rather than names to protect their identities. The focus on mothers reflects the participants who were available and should not be interpreted as suggesting that mothers are the only family members who contribute to children's early learning.

Data were generated through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in participants' homes. Semi-structured interviews provided a flexible conversational format through which participants could describe their experiences, beliefs and practices while allowing the researcher to probe, redirect and clarify responses where necessary (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, and the researcher also made notes during the interviews. Conducting the interviews in participants' homes provided a familiar setting in which mothers could discuss their experiences of supporting their children's learning. The interview data relevant to the present article concerned parents' understandings of children's language and communication, their involvement

in children's learning, culturally and linguistically situated practices, and the ways in which parents supported children's participation and development in the home environment.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analytical process involved repeated reading and familiarisation with the interview material, transcription of recorded interviews, generation of initial codes, identification of patterns, and grouping of related codes into broader themes and sub-themes. The researcher cross-checked the transcripts against the original audio recordings to ensure accuracy. Themes were reviewed and refined through repeated engagement with the coded material and consideration of relationships between codes, themes and the research questions, consistent with a systematic approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For this article, selected interview data were examined specifically in relation to parental pedagogical agency, language and communication practices, culturally and linguistically situated learning, children's participation, and connections between home and early childhood learning. The analysis therefore represents a focused use of the existing interview dataset rather than a reproduction of the full findings of the original study.

Ethical clearance for the original study was granted by the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the relevant early childhood centre, and participating parents provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw without disadvantage. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of participant codes. Research records and audio recordings were stored securely.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Rogoff's Pedagogy-in-Participation (Rogoff, 2003). Together, these perspectives provide a complementary lens for understanding parents as active participants in young children's language development and

learning within culturally and linguistically diverse contexts.

Vygotsky (1978) views learning and development as socially mediated processes. Children develop knowledge and language through interaction with more knowledgeable others, including parents, caregivers and teachers. In this study, the theory helps explain how parents support early language learning through talking, questioning, modelling, explaining, storytelling, singing, encouragement, and multilingual interaction.

Rogoff (2003) emphasises learning through participation in culturally organised everyday activities. Children learn through observing, listening, imitating and contributing alongside more experienced members of their families and

communities. This perspective positions the home as a meaningful learning environment and helps explain how practices such as storytelling, songs, conversation, modelling and multilingual interaction provide opportunities for children to participate in learning

Together, the two perspectives position learning as socially, culturally and linguistically situated. Vygotsky foregrounds interaction, mediation and language, while Rogoff emphasises participation, shared activity and cultural context. Combined, they provide a basis for understanding parents as co-educators and holders of pedagogical knowledge whose everyday practices can support children's participation and early language learning.

Table 1 Theoretical lenses guiding the study

Theoretical lens	Central focus	Relevance to this study
Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory	Social interaction, mediation, language and learning	Explains how parents mediate children's language learning through interaction and communication.
Rogoff's Pedagogy-in-Participation	Participation, culture, shared activity and situated learning	Explains how children learn through participation in everyday family practices.
Combined lens	Socially, culturally and linguistically situated learning	Positions parents as co-educators whose everyday practices support inclusive early language learning.

Source: Vygotsky (1978); Rogoff (2003).

3. Results

The analysis of the mothers' interview accounts generated three themes relevant to the present article: (1) parents as active pedagogical agents in children's everyday learning; (2) culturally and linguistically situated practices in the home; and (3) connecting home, language and early childhood learning. The findings are presented descriptively, with interpretation reserved for the Discussion.

3.1 Parents as Active Pedagogical Agents in Everyday Learning

The mothers described a range of deliberate practices through which they supported their children's learning at home. These included modelling, practising school-related activities, asking questions, providing learning materials,

encouraging participation and reinforcing children's learning through repetition. One mother explained:

"My child can read and write. After school, I normally practise some work with her. I will first write down information and she will copy the work correctly."

The same participant described using everyday interaction to develop children's understanding of colours by asking them to identify different colours. Another mother described a more participatory approach to learning:

"When I help them with homework, my children participate. They are inspired to do well, and they like to compete against each other to succeed."

The mothers also described extending learning beyond formally designated learning times. One mother reported purchasing books and using everyday situations to encourage children to identify colours, count and pronounce letters. Another used ordinary household materials to support counting:

"I support and encourage them; I use pegs for counting because there are many and we can count up to 100."

The accounts further showed that mothers paid attention to children's interests and communication. One participant described giving children her full attention when they spoke, while another described observing children's interests and encouraging them to develop those interests through activities at home.

The mothers described supporting children's learning through structured school-related activities, informal interactions, learning resources, encouragement and attention to children's interests.

3.2 Culturally and Linguistically Situated Practices in the Home

The mothers' accounts demonstrated that language practices in the home were closely connected to family identity and the linguistic realities of children's educational environments. Home languages included African languages alongside English, with mothers describing different combinations of languages used within their households. One participant stated:

"At home we communicate in Sepedi but at school they communicate in Setswana. We support the child."

Another participant identified the home languages as "Tsonga and English", while another identified Sepedi as the home language.

The mothers also described using more than one language when supporting children's learning. One participant explained:

"Here at home we use Sepedi and English. When doing homework we learn or speak in English. We code switch a lot between Sepedi

and English because we do not want them to forget."

Another mother described a multilingual family in which the language used at home differed from the language used at the early childhood setting. She explained that the family communicated in Sesotho even though the child attended a setting where Setswana was used, while also maintaining Tsonga as part of the child's linguistic repertoire.

The mothers also reported using songs, stories, books and other language-related activities to support children's learning. One participant described singing school songs with her child while maintaining the child's attention and offering encouragement. Another described reading stories with her child and explicitly teaching the conventions of beginning and ending a story:

"If you read the story, you start by saying 'once upon a time' and at the end you say 'the end', if you don't then it is not a story."

The accounts therefore demonstrate that mothers used home languages, multiple languages, songs, stories, books, repetition and conversation as part of children's everyday learning experiences.

3.3 Connecting Home, Language and Early Childhood Learning

The mothers also described practices that connected children's experiences at home with their learning at early childhood centres. Several participants reported asking children about what they had done at school and using information from the centre to support learning at home. One mother stated:

"When my child comes back from school, I ask him questions like 'what have you done today?' We work together. I compile his schedule for revision."

Another mother explained that she and her children discussed what happened at school and used school books at home. A further participant actively visited the centre to examine her child's work and then reinforced the learning at home:

“At home I take the liberty to show or emphasise what they have learnt at school.”

The participant also described using Setswana when supporting school learning and practising vowel pronunciation with her child.

Parents also actively sought information from teachers and centres about what children were learning. One mother explained that she approached the centre to find out what her child was doing and how she could assist at home. Another reported requesting guidance from the school when she experienced difficulty supporting reading and writing.

The mothers further described creating learning opportunities beyond the home-school

connection. One participant used books, colouring, counting and alphabet practice during everyday activities, including travelling in the car. Another used household materials such as pegs to practise counting.

Across the accounts, the mothers reported active communication with children, reinforcement of school learning, use of home and school languages, provision of learning materials, and engagement with early childhood centres. The findings indicate that children's learning experiences extended across home and early childhood settings, with mothers participating in and supporting learning across these contexts

Table 2 Summary of Findings on Parents' Pedagogical Practices

Theme	Evidence from mothers' accounts	Practices reported
Parents as active pedagogical agents in everyday learning	Mothers described direct involvement in children's learning and development.	Modelling, practising schoolwork, questioning, encouragement, attention, learning materials and everyday learning activities.
Culturally and linguistically situated practices in the home	Mothers described the use of African home languages alongside English and other languages.	Home-language communication, code-switching, songs, stories, books, repetition and multilingual interaction.
Connecting home, language and early childhood learning	Mothers described communication with children about school and engagement with early childhood centres.	Reinforcing school learning, asking about children's experiences, visiting centres, communicating with teachers and supporting learning at home.

Source: Analysis of interview data from six mothers.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this article was to examine how parents' culturally and linguistically situated practices can function as pedagogical resources for inclusive early language learning and, in doing so, to reposition parents as co-educators. The findings show that the mothers actively supported children's learning through everyday interaction, including modelling, questioning, repetition, encouragement, storytelling, songs, multilingual communication and the use of learning materials. They also connected children's experiences at home with learning in early childhood settings. Taken together, the findings

suggest that parental participation extends beyond supporting prescribed educational activities and includes forms of pedagogical agency embedded in everyday family life.

4.1 Repositioning Parents as Co-Educators

The first theme showed that mothers actively mediated children's learning through everyday practices. Their accounts included practising schoolwork, asking questions, explaining concepts, modelling activities, providing resources, encouraging participation and responding to children's interests. These practices indicate that parental pedagogical knowledge is not necessarily expressed through

formal teaching but can emerge through ordinary interactions and activities within the home.

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory provides a useful lens for understanding this finding. Learning develops through social interaction and mediation, with children supported by more knowledgeable others. The mothers' accounts illustrate this process through questioning, modelling, repetition and encouragement. Parents were therefore actively involved in creating opportunities for children to communicate, practise skills and participate in learning.

Rogoff's (2003) Pedagogy-in-Participation complements this interpretation by emphasising learning through participation in shared and culturally organised activities. The mothers' accounts suggest that children's learning was embedded in conversations, stories, songs, homework, counting and other everyday activities. Parents were consequently not simply assisting formal education but participating with children in activities through which learning occurred.

This finding is consistent with recent scholarship advocating more reciprocal approaches to family engagement. Demissie and Pearse (2025) argue for recognition of parental knowledge and engagement as important dimensions of quality in early childhood education. Similarly, research on family literacy highlights the importance of recognising the resources and practices that families bring to children's early learning (Hayes et al., 2026; Zhang & Brown, 2026). The present findings extend this discussion by foregrounding parental pedagogical agency: the capacity of parents to actively mediate learning through practices developed within everyday family contexts.

4.2 Culturally and Linguistically Situated Learning in the Home

The second theme demonstrated that children's early language learning was embedded in the linguistic and cultural practices of their families. The mothers described using African home languages alongside English and, in some cases, more than one African language. They also

reported using storytelling, songs, books, conversation and repetition as part of children's everyday learning.

These findings are important because they show that multilingualism was actively managed within families rather than simply being an external challenge faced by educational institutions. One mother described deliberately moving between Sepedi and English so that children would retain their languages. Such practices demonstrate how parents negotiate linguistic continuity while responding to the language demands of formal education.

Vygotsky's (1978) perspective highlights language as a central mediating resource in children's cognitive and social development. The mothers' use of familiar languages, questioning, storytelling and conversation therefore provided opportunities for children to communicate and construct meaning within relationships that were familiar to them. Rogoff (2003) further emphasises that learning is embedded in culturally organised participation. From this perspective, storytelling, songs and everyday conversation are not peripheral to learning; they are activities through which children participate in the social and linguistic practices of their families.

Recent South African research supports the significance of these findings. Mahan et al. (2024) demonstrate how multilingual practices can support communication and participation in early childhood classrooms, while Xeketwana et al. (2025) show that families make deliberate language choices in response to multilingual educational environments. Research on culturally responsive early childhood education similarly emphasises the importance of recognising children's cultural and linguistic resources within pedagogical practice (Mahadew, 2025). International research further indicates that multilingual family literacy practices can involve oral language, visual resources and shared interaction across languages (Harris et al., 2025; Zhang & Brown, 2026).

The present findings therefore suggest that inclusive early language learning requires

continuity between children's home linguistic experiences and early childhood settings. Rather than treating home languages as barriers to educational participation, practitioners can recognise them as resources through which children communicate, develop meaning and maintain connections with family and community.

4.3 Connecting Home and Early Childhood Learning

The third theme showed that mothers actively connected children's home experiences with learning at early childhood centres. Mothers asked children about their school experiences, revised learning at home, used school books, communicated with teachers and sought information about what children were learning. These practices indicate that parental engagement extended across the boundary between home and the early childhood setting.

Rogoff's (2003) emphasis on participation is particularly relevant to this finding. Children's learning can be understood as occurring across interconnected social contexts rather than within isolated settings. The mothers' efforts to understand what children were learning and reinforce this learning at home created connections between different environments in which children participated.

This finding also supports Vygotsky's (1978) understanding of learning as socially mediated. When mothers asked children about their day, discussed school experiences, practised language and reinforced learning, they created additional opportunities for children to communicate and consolidate knowledge. The home therefore functioned as an extension of children's learning environment rather than as a separate space disconnected from early childhood education.

The findings have particular relevance for inclusive early childhood education. Demissie and Pearse (2025) emphasise the importance of meaningful parental engagement in quality early childhood provision, while Phajane (2026), in the South African early childhood context, identifies stronger collaboration with parents as important for responding to cultural and linguistic diversity.

The present findings add that such collaboration should not be limited to communication about attendance, behaviour or school activities. Parents can contribute knowledge about children's language, interests, experiences and ways of learning that can inform pedagogical decisions.

4.4 Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings suggest a need for early childhood practitioners to develop more reciprocal relationships with families. Practitioners can learn about children's home languages, family communication practices, stories, songs and everyday learning activities and consider how these resources can inform classroom practice. Practical approaches may include inviting parents to contribute stories and songs, incorporating children's home languages into everyday interactions, discussing home language practices with families, and creating meaningful connections between home and centre learning.

Teacher education also has an important role. Future practitioners need opportunities to develop skills for engaging families as knowledge partners and for working respectfully within multilingual and culturally diverse communities. Such preparation can help teachers move beyond viewing parents primarily as recipients of professional advice. At policy level, parental participation could be conceptualised more broadly than attendance at meetings or assistance with prescribed activities. Policies and institutional practices should support reciprocal home-centre partnerships that recognise parental knowledge and children's home languages as resources for participation and learning. This is particularly important within South Africa's multilingual early childhood landscape.

4.5 Limitations

The findings should be interpreted within several limitations. First, the study draws on the accounts of six mothers from a particular urban township context in Tshwane, limiting transferability to other settings. Second, only mothers' perspectives are represented; fathers, grandparents, and other caregivers may contribute different forms of pedagogical

knowledge. Third, the findings are based on self-reported interview data and therefore reflect how participants described their practices rather than direct observation of parent–child interactions. Future research could include fathers and other caregivers and use observational or longitudinal approaches to examine how culturally and linguistically situated parental practices operate across home and early childhood settings.

5. Conclusion

This article examined how parents' culturally and linguistically situated practices contribute to inclusive early language learning and support the repositioning of parents as co-educators. The findings showed that the participating mothers actively supported children's learning through everyday practices such as modelling, questioning, encouragement, repetition, storytelling, songs, learning materials and conversations about children's experiences. Mothers also drew on home languages, multilingual communication and code-switching to support children's communication and learning. These practices created continuity between children's experiences at home and in early childhood settings.

The findings challenge narrow conceptions of parental involvement that position parents mainly as supporters of formal educational programmes. Rather, parents demonstrate pedagogical knowledge through everyday relationships, interactions and culturally and

linguistically situated practices. Viewed through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Rogoff's Pedagogy-in-Participation, the findings highlight the importance of social interaction, participation and meaningful everyday activities in children's learning. Recognising these practices can therefore strengthen inclusive approaches to early language learning.

The study highlights the need for early childhood practitioners to develop reciprocal partnerships with families and recognise parents' languages, knowledge and everyday practices as resources for learning. Teacher education should similarly prepare practitioners to engage families as knowledge partners within culturally and linguistically responsive approaches.

The study was limited to six mothers in one urban township context in Tshwane and relied on self-reported interview accounts. Future research should therefore include fathers, grandparents and other caregivers and examine parental pedagogical practices across diverse multilingual South African contexts.

Ultimately, repositioning parents as co-educators requires early childhood education to recognise that meaningful learning extends beyond the centre. Valuing family knowledge, multilingual practices and everyday participation can contribute to more inclusive opportunities for children's language development, participation and belonging.

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Author Declaration

- This manuscript is my original work. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used solely for language editing, paraphrasing, and grammatical improvement.
- This study is based on some of the data collected as part of my Master of Education research