



Early childhood care and education as a source of protection and development in the context of community violence: Lessons from Brazil and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines early childhood care and education (ECCE) services as risk mitigators in early learning and development for young children exposed to violence of different kinds in their communities. Case studies in a low-income community each in Brazil and South Africa explored parent, teacher, young children and community service provider perceptions of safety issues. It considers how structural and community factors that influence safety and violence either enabled or disabled children from engaging in early learning activities, and the extent to which ECCE services provide for the holistic well-being and protection of young children. Findings support the significant role of ECCE services in protecting young children but highlight the need for a comprehensive safety net including institutions, homes and community conditions, to enable a full protection of young children in these contexts.

1. Introduction

This paper examines threats to and mitigating factors for young children exposed to different forms of violence in the communities in which they live. Children growing up in contexts of poverty and economic and social inequalities may be exposed to multiple developmental risks (Núcleo Ciência pela Infância, 2022). These include inadequate nutrition, stressful living conditions, limited access to health and education services and in many circumstances direct and indirect exposure to violence (Wachs & Rahman, 2013; Company-Córdoba et al., 2020). Unsafe environments limit children's opportunities for play and exploration where parents keep children inside to protect them (Biersteker et al., 2023; UNICEF South Africa, 2023). Poverty increases the likelihood of children's exposure to family stress and violence, through direct experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by adults or peers, or children indirectly witnessing violence in their homes, schools, and community (Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Orr et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2020). Violence against children is closely intertwined with poverty, inequality, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure and

rapid urbanisation, which contribute the social dynamics which fuel it (Seedat et al., 2009). Failure to provide children with the basic necessities to survive and thrive is harmful to their health and development, cognitive and psycho-social adjustment (Lund et al., 2022). For example, growth stunting compromises cognitive development. Giese and colleagues (2022) reported that children aged 4 to 5 years who were moderately stunted exhibited learning outcomes approximately five to six months behind peers of normal height for age. The stress of chronic poverty may limit maternal capacity for the responsive caregiving important for child cognitive development and emotional well-being (Finegood et al., 2016).

Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who provides the care of the child (UNCRC, 1989, p. 5).

This article, which lays the foundation for understanding and

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identifying different forms of abuse and neglect inflicted on children by different actors, is widely used by governmental and non-governmental agencies to advocate for children's safety. Nonetheless, advocacy work rarely engages with dynamics of abuse and neglect especially in contexts characterised by instability, poverty, inequality and structural violence. For example, structural violence exposes children to undernutrition and lack of access to health, early learning programmes and social services. Food and nutrition insecurity has been referred to as 'slow violence' because of its impact across the life-course (May et al., 2020). Violence against children includes exposure to violence at home or in the community or direct experience of it. Prolonged exposure to adversity such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship— without mitigating factors can result in toxic stress and affect brain development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014; Britto et al., 2017).

While early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes are usually perceived as a space for learning that is essential for child development, their potential role in mitigating harm and violence in contexts of poverty and prevalent violence is less explored in the literature (Efevbera et al., 2018; Landers, 2014). Some recent studies indicate that ECCE services of different kinds may act as an important mitigator of violence against children (VAC) in several different ways (Efevbera et al., 2018, Delany et al., 2023; Landers, 2014; Aquino, 2015). These include providing safe spaces for play and education, health screening, nutritious meals, early identification and referral of child maltreatment, developing children's prosocial behaviours and supporting parents to be more responsive.

The fact that some children can overcome serious hardship, where others do not, is linked to the availability of protective factors. These include adequate nutrition, the primary carer's formal and informal education and experience and ability to cope with stress, social support to the home, preschool enrolment and family education programmes (Matthews & Benvenuti, 2014; Washs & Rahman, 2013; World Health Organization, 2019). For Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres and parent programmes to provide protection to children in difficult circumstances, they must be available, accessible and alert to the types of support parents and children need. Violence in communities may limit these programmes from providing necessary protections to children, e.g. when basic services cannot be accessed or are shut as a result of periods of violence (Redes da Maré, 2024).

While ECCE services can act to protect children from the effects of violence, these themselves are not insulated from the realities of violence. In such contexts, early learning programmes have to respond to trauma in children, teachers themselves suffer trauma, and children are not always safe on their way to ECCE centres (UNESCO, 2022). Given underfunding and lack of staff training in many contexts children may not fully experience safety in their ECCE programmes. There is a scarcity of research that investigates the potential of ECCE programmes in protecting children and ensuring their safety in the contexts characterised by violence and instability (Tomlinson et al. 2017). This article aims to increase knowledge on this topic.

2. Background to this study

This paper is an output of the five-country Safe, Inclusive, Participative Pedagogy (SIPP) early childhood research project.¹ As part of the SIPP project, the authors explored the intersection of safety, protection and violence with early learning and factors that place children at risk in two communities in the cities of Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro. We investigated 1) how safety and safety concerns are viewed by different stakeholders— parents, teachers, children and community service providers; 2) how structural and community-level factors related to

violence/safety either enable or disable children from engaging in early learning activities and 3) the extent to which ECCE services are seen to provide for the holistic safety and protection of young children.

3. Methods

We selected a low-income urban community each in Brazil and South Africa as case studies that would be beneficial for highlighting the complexity of ensuring safe early learning and development in contexts characterised by violence. Ethical approval for this international study was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards in the participating countries. The Moray House School of Education and Sport Research Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh granted approval on April 22, 2020 (Ref: MK00032021), with subsequent amendments through March 2021. In Brazil, the Ethics Research Chamber of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) approved the project on August 11, 2020 (Opinion No. 021/2020; Protocol No. 29/2020). Finally, ethical approval was obtained through the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town on January 19, 2022 (HREC Ref 737/2021). All participants provided informed consent, and the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the respective host institutions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including children and their guardians, following a detailed explanation of their rights, and the intended use of the data collected.²

3.1. Description of the policy contexts and case study sites

The two low-income urban communities are similar in the structural issues they suffer including violence, high crime prevalence, poverty and inequality. They are also similar to many other urban communities in the two countries. In addition, there are legal and policy provisions for young child protection in both Brazil and South Africa.

3.2. Brazil

A basic right to safety for children in Brazil is contained in Articles 226 and 227 of the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution (1988, p. 9) which states that: 'it is the duty of the family, the society, and the government to protect children and adolescents and that the law must severely punish abuse of, violence toward, and sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.' These provisions are underlined and expanded upon in the Basic Law of Early Childhood (Marco Legal da Primeira Infância, 2016) which provides for children's rights to participation, inclusion, respect for individuality and diversity and the reduction of inequalities all of which have a relationship to safety. The non-profit sector reinforces these ideas in the National Coalition for Early Childhood's (RNPI) National Plan for Early Childhood (Rede Nacional Primeira Infância, 2021).

Brazil is an upper middle-income country but with substantial income inequalities. In 2023, it was estimated that at least 32 million Brazilian boys and girls live in poverty. The number represented 63 percent of all children and adolescents in the country and covers several definitions of poverty (UNICEF Brazil, 2023). In urban areas, low-income families mainly live in densely populated low-income communities, known as 'favelas'. These communities are often overcrowded, noisy and unhealthy. In Rio's favelas, violence is endemic as several rival gangs of drug traffickers fight it out, militias (mainly off-duty policemen) commit vigilante 'justice', and the regular police forces 'invade' rather than police or protect the community, firing indiscriminately in search of traffickers. Parents with jobs have difficulty finding ECCE provision and are sometimes forced to lock their children in their homes or rely on older siblings' or extended family care to attend to

¹ For more information <https://www.sipp.education.ed.ac.uk/>.

² More details on methods of data collection are outlined below.

children material and protection needs. There are often no recreational spaces and those that exist are litter strewn and residents complain about the presence of drug related activities. These problems indicate a clear lack of effective public sector action in what were considered, for a long time, informal communities and include problems of water supply, garbage pick-up and sanitation.

3.3. South Africa

South Africa, an upper-middle-income country, has stark income inequality. Nearly 7 million children under 6 years old live in the country, with 70% in poverty and 40% in households unable to meet basic nutritional needs (Hall et al., 2024). Laws, including the Constitution, support international commitments to protect children from violence and neglect. Social protections include a child support grant for low-income parents and free healthcare for pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children under six (Republic of South Africa, 2004). Child protection is primarily the domain of the Department of Social Development; however, relevant policies call for coordinated action including the health, education, and safety and security sectors. The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006) ensures children's protection from violence and regulates safety in ECCE settings. The Child Care and Protection Policy (Department of Social Development, 2019) integrates protective measures with developmental services. The Integrated Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy (Republic of South Africa, 2022) emphasizes safe ECCE centres and caregiver support to promote positive discipline and responsive care.

The case study site, Vrygrond (Free Ground) near Cape Town is an informal settlement and bears the legacy of decades of inequality (Statistics South Africa 2012). The one square kilometre area is home to a diverse population of over 42,000 people including Coloured (mixed race), IsiXhosa and foreign African nationals. In 2014 there were approximately 5000 children aged 0 to 5 years (True North, 2014). There is high unemployment and poverty as well as poverty-related social problems such as crime and violence, domestic violence and substance abuse. There is no police station. There are 35 private and civil-society-run ECCE centres attended by 1700 children. In addition, some nonprofit organisations offer part-time programmes for a small number of parents and young children. Around two thirds of young children do not have access to organised ECCE.

3.4. Methods of data collection

As the Table 1 shows, data collection in both countries employed a

Table 1
Summary of Methods Used.

Method	Brazil	South Africa
Semi-structured Individual interview	Parents/responsible adults (20); school-teachers and directors (20); Civil Society and government key-actors (14)	Government/Development partners (4), Civil society (4) and ECCE Principals (2)
Focus Groups	Community 'rodas de conversa' (group discussions involving community residents and selected external participants) (More than 300)	Community advisory group (8) ECCE teachers and principals (26) Parents (13)
Safety Mapping	Community advisory group	Community advisory group, ECCE teachers and principals, parents
Play-based group methods to engage children	Storytelling, picture drawing, and game-based techniques (30 children – 3 – 7-year old)	Persona dolls, stories, picture drawing. 4 Child groups at ECCE centres and 2 at out of centre programmes (38 children 4 – 6-year old)

participatory approach involving multiple respondents engaged with children from birth to preschool age. An overall framework of guiding questions on the key concepts had been designed collaboratively by all study partners and then in accordance with the agreed participatory and collaborative research approach adapted to each case study context. The research teams had strong connections to their respective communities which facilitated access to the research sites. In addition, a local Community Advisory Group was established, in each country, to approve the questions, help design and implement the study and to identify the respondents for interviews/surveying and focus groups.

In Brazil, the CIESPI/PUC-Rio involved research staff and several community partners who designed and implemented the study. In South Africa The Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town partnered with True North, a local ECD organisation, who helped establish an Advisory Committee of local ECCE stakeholders to guide the study. Different methods, agreed with each Community Advisory Group were used to elicit different perspectives – surveys and individual interviews to collect in depth key informant information, community level focus groups to tap common experiences and raise awareness of issues. Safety mapping was to locate dangers to children and safe places which assisted with development of later interventions. The child methods used built on the use of methods familiar to children in each community (Porto & Lacerda, 2022; Porto et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2023) either from prior activities or currently in use in the ECCE centres. Data collection took over six months in Brazil and in South Africa from January to September 2022 following the easing of COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns. Notes throughout the process were recorded and kept and transcripts were made of all sessions.

3.5. Analysis

To gain an understanding and provide a thick description of local perspectives on ECCE as a violence prevention and mitigation strategy inductive thematic analysis was undertaken across the data sets in each site to find 'repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Prevalent themes related to local understandings and experiences of safety, dangers and protective or unsafe spaces were identified from responses to the survey, interviews and focus group transcripts, community maps, children's conversations in responses to the child friendly stimulus activities. The coding framework used was jointly designed by the country research teams guided by the common framework questions on safety. Coding of transcripts was shared and checked by another country team member. In both sites the analysis was presented to the community groups for validation of the researchers' interpretations.

4. Findings

4.1. Brazil

4.1.1. Understandings of safety

Most of the Rocinha respondents did not think that children aged 0–5 lived in safety in Rocinha. They emphasised how children were exposed to violence:

It is not healthy for a child to know about violence which he does when he is in a favela, to be faced with violence, to have visual access to things which a child should not experience.

Although they thought complete safety did not exist in any area, they talked about spaces that offered some safety for children. These included the home, ECCE centres, the public library, the sports complex, the health and social assistance centres and religious places. When asked what would improve the situation, they mentioned better access to health, education, the redistributions of income, social and emotional support and strengthening local networks.

4.1.2. How children's early learning engagement is affected by structural and community level factors related to violence/safety

Safety in the home: In general, all groups of respondents thought children are safe in their homes, but parents talked about the need for a constant adult presence with the children and the difficulties of arranging this when parents were working. Parents and teachers talked about the importance of the family being present and the need for parents to be constantly alert for the safety of their children. For example, one of the parents interviewed reported:

'There must be a family, with a healthy structure which understands the needs of the child, which understands that a child is an individual and needs complete support to grow.'

Teachers were concerned about the danger children may find themselves in due to the physical environment and weather conditions, even when children are at home. Rocinha is located on a steep hillside and summer rains can cause landslides that can damage or destroy homes. When asked about what they feared most, several young children mentioned they were afraid of rain, especially 'strong rain' or '(to be) in the rain without my parents'.

While many children were physically safe in their homes, the small size of homes, the narrow alleyway streets that separated homes were such that many homes lacked light and air flow and as a consequence the rate of diseases such as tuberculosis and leprosy are very high in the community (Boghossian & Bush, 2016). Also related to the physical environment, when children were asked about what they feared most, they reported the presence of big rats.

Safety in the community: There was general agreement among all groups of respondents that there were no safe places for children outside the home except in churches, other religious meeting places, the public library and the sports centre which did not have many specialised programmes for young children. The few public squares were abandoned and dominated by drug traffickers, and thus were deemed unsafe. A community leader reported: 'We have a square in the bottom part of Rocinha where theoretically the children could play but when the children go to play, the majority [youth or adult residents] are smoking, taking drugs, prostituting'.

Parents explored the impact of this on their children's wellbeing. A mother expressed concerns over her daughter's safety, and reported the following:

She [my daughter] is bored because she is not accustomed to be(ing) locked up all day inside...she is irritated, she cries, some days she screams, but unhappily that is what you have to do because I do not have the confidence to let her outside.

Most homes are only accessible through narrow dirt or concrete step alleys. Open sewers, uncollected garbage, and unfenced flat roof tops are a constant threat to physical security.

The two main roads running through the community are jammed with buses, cars and motor bikes and present a constant hazard to young children, especially if unattended. Frequent shootings by drug traffickers and between police and traffickers present a constant threat of being injured by 'lost bullets'. The police presence is sporadic, violent, and largely confined to incursions to find traffickers which the residents referred to as 'invasions' or 'operations'. The terms used when referring to police raids indicate the violent and aggressive nature of these incidents that children are exposed to.

4.1.3. How ECCE centres are seen to provide for the holistic safety and protection of young children

Given the unsafe conditions in the community, the existence of ECCE centres was a very bright light in the lives of young children who obtained a place. The alternatives were being at home, sometimes in the care of a sibling, or even locked up without adult supervision. In general, parents, teachers and community respondents thought that ECCE centres were safe places for children. Entry to the centres was secure, and once inside the children were safe (Couto et al., 2024). We observed the

children in various centres and they seemed very comfortable. When asked what activities they liked the most, the majority responded 'to play, jump and to eat!'.

As one ECCE teacher said:

The best for them is when they are well physically and emotionally in a place where people transmit this to them. For me, safety is doing for them so that they feel well wherever they are and whatever they are doing. Here I work with food— for safety is partly food— and safety at bath time, so that no accidents happen.

Teachers pointed out that they were constantly aware of safety issues including physical safety from 'physical traps' inside the school, to child behaviour throughout the day. Some ECCE centres were not suitable for children with physical disabilities because of the lack of ramps, for example. The schools promoted health and safety through the provision of meals, and good sanitary conditions. Teachers also referred to the emotional safety of the children which was supported by the teachers' individual attention to the needs and feelings of each child. In the public centres, there were often up to two children per class on the autism spectrum whose presence, once the child had a formal diagnosis, entitles them to a special assistant. Some of these children could be disruptive, but if they had formal diagnoses, municipal rules provided that total classroom size could be reduced by two students.

Teachers insisted that the children's sense of belonging, and therefore being safe, was enhanced by constant efforts to see how the children were responding to the programming, and where possible, choice of activities.

Supply and demand: ECCE centres are basically safe, but not all children can get a place. The current national government has lifted previous tough restrictions on overall federal spending and as a result there has recently been large increases in spending for early childhood.

In 2019, 38.9% of children aged 0–4 in Brazil were enrolled in an ECCE Centre despite the fact that the National Plan for Education required 50% of those children being enrolled in 2024. The rate of enrolment was 55% from the wealthiest 25% of families compared to 26% from families in the lowest income quartile (FMCSV, 2020). Families with children with disabilities and families with difficulty accessing the internet for online applications for a place are specifically disadvantaged. Moreover, many ECCE centres are half day (4 h), leaving families with often difficult juggling of care issues. The advent of President Lula's third administration in 2023 brought with it a new support for early childhood. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of early childhood places in public centres increased by 296,000 or 12.1% (MEC/INEP, 2023). However, the lack of sufficient ECCE places is still a clear and critical threat to the safety of young children in Rocinha and the rest of Brazil.

4.2. South Africa

4.2.1. Understandings of safety

Different ECD stakeholders have varied understandings of safety. National and provincial policy makers and ECD advocates who participated in some aspects of this study agree that safety is largely understood. As explained by a national ECCE Association, 'in terms of the environmental health regulations of the Children's Act with some attempt at safeguarding by checking that people don't have a criminal record or [are] on the Child Protection Register'. Other policy influencers highlighted the limited emphasis in the regulations on 'emotional, social safety and psychological safety' (International Development Partner), 'feel (ing) safe inside... and around the people who are providing this curriculum' (ECCE Community of Practice). This includes ...providing children with an atmosphere and environment which will enable them to play and learn freely ... irrespective of their culture, ... their abilities, irrespective of who they are but accepting them as they are' (National Department of Education) and 'children feeling that in this space, I can touch, I can jump, I can move stuff around

without being reprimanded or getting into trouble' (National ECCE Association). It was important to have staff who were 'responsive to the voice of children when they articulate that there are threats to their safety in their household, in their communities' (Provincial Social Worker).

In summary, policy makers and influencers expressed the view that safety for young children is largely seen as safe infrastructure and appointing suitable staff but there needed to be more responsiveness to children's feelings of safety and listening to children in ECCE programmes.

The Vrygrond respondents' understandings and experiences of the safety of young children at home, in the community and in ECCE settings similarly highlighted the importance of safe, trusting relationships that support participation as well as on physical safety.

While parents saw keeping children physically safe as the main element defining safety, and a city representative explained the need for spaces to keep children mentally and physically safe, community service organisations and ECCE teachers emphasised safety as a form of resilience 'children having self-confidence, feeling free to be a child, to express themselves' (Advisory Committee Focus Group). They explained that the 'feeling of safe, is different from being safe' (ECCE Principal) and focused on building trusting relationships, encouraging children to express themselves. Children in several groups acted out the signs of being scared. They saw their mothers and fathers and God as sources of comfort and protection.

4.3. How children's early learning engagement is affected by structural and community level factors related to violence/safety

4.3.1. Safety in the home

Parents, ECCE staff and service organisations expressed concern about some homes being unsafe. This included infrastructure hazards – fires were frequent in the area. While supervised children were safe, respondents explained.

'The home context is challenging and does not guarantee safety of children– different families stay together in one yard. Toilets are shared by different people. Sometimes children are left home alone with no adult supervision' (ECCE Principal).

'Drugs and social ills, partners who drink, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect' (Advisory Group) and the stress of trying to provide for basic needs were common. Child respondents in all groups said that they felt safe at home and in the yard. But the outside threatens: As a child explained 'It's scary when someone is beating on the door (at night)' (Centre Group 2).

Living conditions are 'intensely pressurised', parents are impacted by trauma and children may be exposed to harsh discipline when 'traumatised adults ... try...to be a safe space for children but they react to the children very often the way they've been raised' (Local Government). As an intervention to mitigate this, more systematic and widespread parent support and education workshops will be offered through ECCE centres and service organisations. There is also a need to reach out to families of non-enrolled children who are most at risk. The mixed Vrygrond population includes immigrants from several countries in Africa, who may suffer discrimination, including some bullying and name calling of children e.g. the derogatory term 'wah wah', a reference to how the language sounds.

4.3.2. Safety in the community

The Vrygrond community is unsafe on many levels as explained by all categories of respondents. First, spaces are overcrowded and unhygienic – a pastor described a typical space as 'A little house and lots of shacks on the property with only one bin. So ... a huge amount of litter. It is overflowing, where children are walking through dirty nappies. They are walking through broken glass'. Dirty water, open sewerage in some areas and a canal full of water were identified in the mapping

sessions. Some children walk to the nearby beach where, parents indicated, they might be exposed to harm.

Second, roads were not seen as safe, they are narrow with worn road markings and, stop streets are not observed, drunk driving is common. Respondents reported:

'If you drive in the mornings, the kids are wherever close to their street. They are hanging out. If you are living in a three-by-three metre shack, chances are that you are just going to be on the street being relatively close' (Pastor).

According to parents, it is common that children play soccer in the roads. ECCE principals reported that the dump is unsafe, and children go to see if they can get something to eat, exposing them also to tractors and vehicles at the site. Third, crime and gangsterism and extortion are rampant. Children are not safe when they are outside and there is a lack of safe play spaces. The Advisory Committee observed that 'there are crime issues in the community. There are shootings. There is alcohol abuse and drug abuse and all that. Gangs control the parks which are part of their territory'. Parents of children not in centres expressed similar concerns reporting during mapping that 'The park isn't safe, needs to have proper gates. Gangsters sit there all day and if they are shooting children could be hit'.

Children aged 4–6 years constantly referred to the danger of going outside, especially on their own. They were afraid of dogs, strangers and other ethnic groups. 'Mom says: don't get out of the house– they will kill you' (Centre Group 3). 'They are going to kidnap us and give us to other people, they are going to cut our heads off' (Centre Group 4). Some of the children described violence they had witnessed including a beer bottle stabbing and someone being handcuffed by the police after a killing. There was ambivalence about the police seen by some children as dangerous 'Police will arrest you and shoot you' (Centre Group 3) but by others as a support to be asked for help, 'if you were lost' (Non-Centre Group 2).

Since the lack of safe places was surfaced in the project, two controlled playparks and an eco-garden have been established by Advisory Committee members.

4.4. How ECCE services are seen to provide for the holistic safety and protection of young children

All respondents including ECCE staff, community service organisations, parents and children saw ECCE settings as safe and protective spaces. For example, 'Children are safer in school and in preschool than they are in the community' (ECCE Principal) and 'The school and crèche is their safe place because they can sometimes do stuff at school and can get the attention at school that they don't get at home' (ECCE Principals Focus Group).

ECCE staff and others detailed many safety provisions including provisions for the physical and psychological protection of children in and out of the centres. These included a safe environment, close supervision, children being brought to the centre by parents or older siblings, and access is closely monitored. Children are taught about what to do in dangerous situations and child respondents spontaneously recited the Police and Fire Brigade numbers as well as being aware of not going out alone.

ECCE teachers talked about making children comfortable for example: 'It's key for that child from the start to feel that it's a safe space that he's going to be in. And so, the repetition of words of security, words of affirmation' (ECCE Teachers Focus Group).

As a faith-based organisation put it,

Your safe space is not ...just the facility. It is also your staff being informed, knowing how to be empathetic, how to deal with discipline, how to deal with issues of concern within the social context of your community.

There were however challenges in some situations including poor

supervision due to insufficient staff and stressed teachers shouting at children and taking out their resentment of parents who pick up children late on the child.

Children in centre groups commented that unlike their mothers, their teachers did not hit them and 'let them mess' and in one centre how they were encouraged to express their feelings by using an emoticon poster. At Centre 4 children described enjoying the outside play area, which they understood to be safe unlike the public parks.

It is clear that ECCE centres are seen to provide important protection for children's physical and psychosocial needs and that staff were alert to the importance of offering a responsive service as well as promoting acceptance of diversity. However, children from poorer families cannot access ECCE services as they levy fees to meet costs. Parents commented that there were not enough ECD centres and they were too expensive.

Respondents reported that few children with disabilities, who are very vulnerable to violence and abuse, access ECCE centres. In addition, teachers themselves needed more support to provide responsive care and the Community Advisory Group hopes to plan workshops that can provide support for ECCE staff to reduce their work-related stress.

5. Discussion

This study involving two different communities highlights the many similarities in the structural and community risks that affect young children's learning and development and the protection afforded by ECCE services.

5.1. Understandings of safety

Child safety in country policies (Powell et al, 2020) as well as research have focused primarily on maltreatment and injury prevention though school children also refer to bullying. A study in which children aged 9–12, defined safety also focused on the 'absence of harm' (Collins, 2001) and that 'being alone, bullies, seeing violence, people who threaten, unfamiliar places and/or unfamiliar people, and hearing about violence jeopardize their safety' (p. 40). Ben-Arieh and colleagues (2009) found differences in parents', teachers' and children's assessments of their safety. In this study while all types of respondents talked about protection from physical harm, teachers also emphasised the importance of trusting relationships and listening to children as characteristics of safety, while parents included the need for income, access to health and education services, and safe outdoor spaces.

5.2. How children's early learning engagement is affected by structural and community level factors related to violence/safety

The two communities are low-income, lack adequate housing and services, and suffer from violence in all the forms identified in CRC Article 19. Most children and adults felt that children were safe at home when supervised. However, respondents expressed concerns about safety even at home. Food insecurity was a problem, as were overcrowding, environmental health concerns such as sewage, garbage and rats, extreme weather conditions. In Vrygrond there were concerns about whether the children's homes are safe, Vrygrond respondents were concerned about harsh discipline, stressed parents trying to provide for basic needs, substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. As the home is the context for most violence against very young children (Bower & Dawes, 2014), parents must be a primary target for supportive interventions.

In both communities there was a sense that children's safety could not be ensured outside the home, roads are unsafe, there are no safe outdoor spaces for play, gangs dominate public areas and garbage is strewn about. In both, there was ambivalence towards the role of the police. In both parents are constantly vigilant for their children and warning them about dangers. All these factors contribute to a high level of stress and trauma for parents and children and are key developmental

risks (Peek, 2008; Wachs & Rahman, 2013, Bower & Dawes, 2014; Britto et al, 2017).

5.3. How ECCE centres are seen to provide for the holistic safety and protection of young children

Matthews and Benvenuti (2014) identify adequate childcare with an inclusive approach as protective for children which was echoed by respondents in both communities (Gomes et al, 2023). In centres there is a strong emphasis on supervision and safety with controlled access. Contributing to overall safety, careful attention is paid to sanitation, hygiene and nutrition. For many children, centre meals are their main meals of the day. Staff also pride themselves on being aware of and supporting the children's emotional needs. In Vrygrond teachers focus on safety awareness, race, gender and disability responsibility in the curriculum. Centres enhance protection by referring families for health and social services and documents. But at the regulatory level, there is a sense that strict health and safety regulations receive more attention than educational standards (Biersteker et al. 2023).

The key difference between the two communities is the presence in Rocinha of municipal ECCE centres, non-profit centres subsidized by the municipality which are mainly free of charge, as well as the private centres which are financially out of reach of many families (Gomes, Castro & Couto, 2023). In 2018 in Brazil, 46% of children 0–3 in urban areas were "in need" of an ECCE centre place, 23% because of poverty and 20.3% because of an economically active mother/guardian (FMCSV, 2020). Very few ECCE centres in Vrygrond receive a public subsidy and all charge fees and so are out of the reach of many families. Enrolment in South Africa is skewed to 3–5-year-olds with only 20% of children under 3 attending (Hall et al, 2024). Increasing affordable ECCE access especially for younger children would significantly improve protection.

Community violence can impact children in centres as they go to and from school and widespread violence can result in centres being closed. In the Rio favela, Complexo da Maré, for example, between 2016 and 2023, a full year of schooling was lost due to closures caused by community violence (Redes da Maré, 2022). Overall, teachers and parents feel centres were safe places. Other safe places were libraries, religious institutions and service organisations.

6. Limitations

As with most case studies, a key limitation lies in the generalizability of the findings. However, the selected research sites shared many characteristics with many poor urban communities with broadly similar economic conditions, which may enhance the transferability of findings. Researcher interpretation bias also presents a potential concern, although validation workshops were employed to mitigate this risk. Another limitation relates to the possibility that predefined questions and core concepts constrained participant responses. This issue was particularly pronounced when engaging with young children; however, the use of child-friendly, creative, and flexible techniques helped to address these constraints. Additionally, the incorporation of mapping exercises, open-ended interview questions, and general discussion formats within focus groups provided opportunities for more expansive and nuanced input.

7. Conclusion

Our study shows that in both communities where young children suffer from the many forms of violence those accessing ECCE centres are seen to benefit from the protection of physical safety, emotional care, nutrition, good sanitation, and opportunities. While staff training, education plans and the monitoring of education programmes could all be improved, centres are vital to the lives and prospects of the young children they serve.

However, while ECCE centres can protect and boost children's

resilience and enable parents to seek employment, other protective measures such as consistent access to food and healthy diets, primary caregiver support, and other social support networks are fundamental in protecting vulnerable children (de Leeuw & Malcolm-Smith, 2023). There is no substitute for the lack of the public provision of basic service in the creation of a healthy early childhood context. To adequately protect young children, it is critical to offer a broad range of ECCE services including support for primary caregivers, provide safe spaces and community level crime prevention programmes.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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