

Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa: A Call to Action

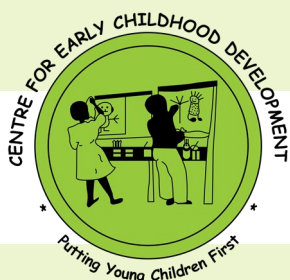
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27 - 29 September 2023

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Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa: A Call to Action

27 - 29 September 2023, Cape Town

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This booklet contains all the abstracts for the presentations at the conference, "Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa: A Call to Action". This includes presentations from the Khawuleza event on 27 September, as well as the breakaways sessions on 28 and 29 September. The presenter(s) for each presentation is indicated; for information on abstract co-authors please speak to the presenters directly. A detailed programme for the conference is also included here.

Day 1: 27 September 2023

12h00 - 13h30	Registration
13h45 - 14h00	Conference Opening Act - Centre for Early Childhood Development
14h00 - 14h15	Conference Welcome - Dr Muswaba, Principal of the College of Cape Town
14h15 - 14h25	Message from the City of Cape Town Executive Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis
14h30 - 15h15	Keynote Address – On love and playfulness Professor Nuraan Davids, Professor of Philosophy of Education – Stellenbosch University
15h15 - 15h45	The development of emergent biliteracy in young children Dr Xolisa Guzula, Senior Lecturer in Applied Language and Literacy Studies – University of Cape Town

Day 1: 27 September 2023

'Khawuleza' Event:	
15h45 - 17h15	1. Disparities between affluent and impoverished ECD centres: What is the reality, the impact and the solution? Amanda Nomsa Mbali – Centre for Early Childhood Development
	2. Affirming ECD practitioners and children through music and song: An overview of the MusicWorks Training Programme Raymond Schuller – MusicWorks
	3. Stronger: A comprehensive toolbox for empowering family connection to allow children to succeed Danielle Moosajie – Arise
	4. The Helix Collective – Crisis intervention funding for 0-5 year olds Elisabeth van Wyk – The Helix Collective
	5. ECD Connect: A practitioner's pocket assistant Jade Jacobsohn – ECD Connect - DGMT
	6. Leading the way: Nurturing success through management competencies in South Africa's ECD sector Dr Jessica Ronaasen – Stellenbosch University
	7. Creating open-source materials to support quality early learning Kirsty Paxton – SmartStart Early Learning NPC
	8. Book-sharing for Fathers – Helping fathers create nurturing and stimulating relationships with their young children Karen Ross – Mikhulu Trust
	9. MASKOT – Keeping children on track Léanne Keet – Masikhule
	10. Beefing up the ECD package of care – Khula Nathi Helen Donkin – Zero2Five Trust
	11. The Chaeli Campaign ECD Outreach Programme: Upskilling parents and ECD Practitioners to better support children with barriers to learning Olwethu Nqevu – The Chaeli Campaign
	12. Book Dash – Making beautiful, open books for the ECD sector Julia Norrish – Book Dash
17h15 - 17h30	Networking – Tea/coffee

Day 2: 28 September 2023

DAY 2	Tea/coffee on arrival			
09h00 - 10h30	Plenary: Drivers of Quality Early Learning, using evidence to inform action Linda Biersteker, Sonja Giese, Dr Janeli Kotze & Dr Nicholas Dowdall <i>Session facilitator: Dr Nicholas Dowdall</i>			
10h30 - 10h50	Tea			
	Main hall	Conference room	Room 17/18	Room 19/20
10h50 - 11h30	Recognition of Prior Learning for access: Piloting an approach to 'open doors' at undergraduate level Dr Giulietta Harrison – SANTS Private Higher Education Institution	Effective leadership and management in Early Childhood Development centres: A case study of Mvudi cluster Shonisani Agnes Mulovhedzi – University of Venda	Down to business: Unlocking success for ECD centres by adopting a business mindset Lyndsey Petro – GROW ECD	Enhancing access to quality early childhood development (ECD) services in marginalised communities: The Kouga ECD Project Jessica Blom – Centre for Early Childhood Development
11h30 - 12h10	Implementation of the ECD Mobile programme in Northern Limpopo by Khanimamba Training and Resource Centre Queen Baloyi – Khanimamba Training & Resource Centre	Child-centred climate action: Where the most vulnerable become the most valuable Nicole Biondi – The Do More Foundation	Exploring the possible enablers of a numeracy and literacy integrated Family Maths Storytime Programme Roxanne Long – South African Numeracy Chair Project, Rhodes University	Enhancing early development nutrition Petrina Pakoe, Amelia Koeries & Thandi Mtombeni – Peninsula School Feeding Association
12h10 - 12h50	Occupational Therapy intervention in Early Learning Programmes Léanne Keet – Masikhule	Making local government work for early childhood development Tinotenda M Muringani & Tshepo Mantjé – Equality Collective	Investing in home and community-based early learning programmes as a strategy for quality access Rebecca Hickman – SmartStart Early Learning NPC	Developing ECD teachers' knowledge and skills to meet the demands of quality education in a rural context Ayesha Carrim – University of South Africa

Day 2: 28 September 2023

	Main hall	Conference room	Room 17/18	Room 19/20
12h50 - 13h30	WhatsApp: A training tool that supports learning, implementation, and community building Anya Morris – Africa A+	The importance of play in early learning: Knowledge, attitudes and practices of parents and caregivers with children birth to six years old Lungile Mdluli & Mpho Papale – UNICEF	Ready-Set-Go: Empowering school readiness in children through collaborative parent-child programmes Danielle Moosajie, Alexa Russell Matthews & Siyabulela Tungani – Arise	Teachers at the core: Exploring the usefulness, feasibility, and implementation of an early literacy and language programme Monique Visser & Dr Shelley O'Carroll – Stellenbosch University
13h30 - 14h10	Lunch			
14h10 - 14h50	Khula Nathi – Bringing growth monitoring to ECD centres Helen Donkin & Julika Falconer – Zero2Five Trust	The rhetoric of workforce professionalism: An analysis of South African early childhood policy Dr Mary G Clasquin-Johnson, Colwyn D Martin & Hasina B Ebrahim – University of South Africa	[Re]Imagining parent and teacher understanding of parent participation in an ECCE setting Ally Connelly – University of the West of Scotland	Building a common understanding of quality ECE: Hearing from practitioners, caregivers and children Malibongwe Gwele – Children's institute, University of Cape Town, & Linda Biersteker
14h50 - 15h30	Evaluation of the EAT LOVE PLAY TALK pilot Parent Education Programme Dr Jessica Ronaasen – The Do More Foundation, & Linda Biersteker	Translanguaging as a medium of communication in multilingual peri-urban pre-school classrooms Sibongile Mahan – University of South Africa	Effective professional development for early years education practitioners in disadvantaged communities: Challenges and strategies Prof Chinedu Okeke – University of the Free State	Inclusion of 21st Century skills in effective ECD programmes for children aged four to six years Wilna van Rooyen – Vivlia Publishers
15h30 - 16h30	Panel Discussion: Working together for quality ECD in South Africa Dr Sigamoney Naicker – Department of Education; Ms Ntjantja Ned – Hollard Foundation Trust; Ms Tracey Chambers – GROW ECD; Prof Hasina Ebrahim – University of South Africa Session facilitator: Prof Eric Atmore			
	Networking - Tea Break			

Day 3: 29 September 2023

DAY 3	Tea/coffee on arrival			
09h00 - 10h00	<p>Panel Discussion: Equity from the Start: Advocacy and Social Justice in Early Childhood Development Theodora Lutuli – ECD Activist; Inkwenkwezi Educare Centre Yusrah Ehrenreich – Centre for Early Childhood Development Mmatsetshweu Ruby Motaung – Training & Resources in Early Education Elisabeth van Wyk – The Helix Collective <i>Session facilitator: Jessica Blom</i></p>			
	Main hall	Conference room	Room 17/18	Room 19/20
10h00 - 10h40	<p>The development of the professional teaching standards for the ECD educator workforce in South Africa Hasina B Ebrahim, Sheila Drew & Rene King – University of South Africa</p>	<p>The role of play in the development of executive functions in age three- to five-year-olds in South Africa: The LEGO PLAY 2.0 Project Rachel Neville – JET Education Services</p>	<p>Ikamva Labantu Principals Training Programme: Making a difference Mildred Bopoto, Barbara Stemmert – Ikamva Labantu Charitable Trust</p>	<p>Diverse mathematics learning styles in rural Early Childhood Development centres of OR Tambo District, Eastern Cape Province Neliswa Gqoli – Walter Sisulu University</p>
10h40 - 11h20	<p>Toy library norms and standards: Debate, discuss and learn Dr Monica Stach – Cotlands</p>	<p>Are commercially-produced resources essential for an emerging literacy programme? Julie Hay – Singakwenza Early Childhood Education</p>	<p>Child protection is everyone’s business – A Protective Behaviours approach to personal safety Candice van Rooyen – Protective Behaviours Southern Africa (PBSA)</p>	<p>Improving early childhood development in informal settlements: An innovative multi-country pilot project Michaela Ashley-Cooper – CECD & Thozama Nomnga (FEDUP)</p>
11h20 - 11h50	Tea			
11h50 - 12h30	<p>Overcoming barriers to ECD registration for the delivery of effective ECD programmes in rural settings Nokubonga Purity Hlongwane – Zero2Five Trust</p>	<p>Using data collection tools and systems to drive change in early learning in South Africa: A case study Sonja Giese & Andrew Dawes – DataDrive2030</p>	<p>Community Health Workers supporting mothers in the First Thousand Days through parental support and book-sharing Karen Ross – Mikhulu Trust</p>	<p>Breaking Barriers: A Call for Change in Local Governments’ Regulatory Frameworks for ECD Centres, Starting with the City of Cape Town Yusrah Ehrenreich – Centre for Early Childhood Development</p>

Day 3: 29 September 2023

	Main hall	Conference room	Room 17/18	Room 19/20
12h30 - 13h10	Towards reconstructing student-teacher beliefs about children through theoretical and practical encounters in Grade R Dr Linda Bosman & Lynn Chambers – Stellenbosch University	Quality assurance in ECD in South Africa Hasina B Ebrahim – University of South Africa	Bringing a Wordworks online self-study training course to ECD practitioners: A snapshot of pilot learnings Asanda Mpahla – Wordworks	Understanding fathers' involvement in their children's early learning and development: Perceptions of South African fathers and mothers of young children Lauren van Niekerk – UCT
13h10 - 13h50	Lunch			
13h50 - 14h30	Improving South African Grade R children's participation and transforming a teacher's pedagogical approach through robotics dialogue storybooks Hanrie Bezuidenhout – University of Johannesburg	Malungeni: From baseline to change – Promoting quality ECD in practice Dr Giulietta Harrison – SANTS Private Higher Education Institution	Ocean kraals: Re-surfacing discarded stories and materials for sustainable futures Joanne Peers, Dr Theresa Giorza & Carole Scott – Centre for Creative Education	Analysing the growth of early grade mathematics research in South Africa Mellony Graven, Samantha Morrison, Hamsa Venkat & Pamela Vale – Rhodes University
14h30 - 15h10	Developing students' and early childhood development practitioners' awareness of sensory gardens benefits Nkhensani Susan Thuketana – University of Pretoria	Sivulithuba: Creating opportunities for capacity building and access support in the early years Mmatsetshweu Ruby Motaung – Training & Resources in Early Education	Chapter 7 of the Children's Act: What are the best interests of young children? Daniel Peter Al-Naddaf – Equal Education Law Centre	The importance of mental mathematics for supporting Foundation Phase teaching and learning Mellony Graven & Hamsa Venkat – Rhodes University
15h10 - 15h50	Exploring the impact of a story-based pre-Grade R teacher training programme Dr Shelley O'Carroll – Independent	Early childhood development practitioners' competence in developing learners' literacy skills Nomasomi Matiso – Walter Sisulu University	Enhancing early childhood education? Exploring the intersection of teacher education and digital learning Donna Hannaway – University of South Africa	Training ECD teachers for early intervention and inclusion for children with disabilities Dr Ensa Johnson, Dr Mary G Clasquin-Johnson & Dr Arine Kuyler – University of South Africa
15h50 - 16h15	Conference Closure - Dr Linda Bosman, President of the South African Research for Early Childhood Education (SARAECE) & Prof Eric Atmore, Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD)			
	Networking - Tea Break			

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ABSTRACTS

Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Amanda Nomsa Mbali (Community Engagement Activist) – Centre for Early Childhood Development

Disparities between affluent and impoverished ECD centres: What is the reality, the impact and the solution?

In this presentation, I will highlight the inequalities that exist between early childhood development (ECD) centres located in affluent areas and those in impoverished areas in South Africa. This will be done by providing a brief synopsis of the reality on the ground in the ECD sector in South Africa, followed by an exploration of actual ECD centres in South Africa. This will consist of photographs and discussion on ECD centres in affluent areas and in informal and impoverished areas across South Africa.

I will bring to life the inequalities that exist. For example, 22% of two-year-olds in Quintile 1, the poorest grouping, access an early learning programme, while 60% of two-year-olds in Quintile 5, the wealthiest grouping, access an early learning programme.¹ I will also discuss the reasons why this inequality gap widens, with each passing day, and the impact of this inequality in the ECD sector.

There is a global agreement on the benefits of early childhood care and education, including poverty alleviation, and because of these findings, I will show why government must focus on the ECD sector and support ECD programmes and social service organisations (SSOs) in the ECD sector. In fact, researchers have shown that inequality within and between populations has its origins in poor early childhood experiences.²

This presentation intends to show the differences in children's early education experiences, as determined by the socio-economic status of the community in which they live and are cared for. It is hoped that this will help to clearly show the urgent need for assistance to disadvantaged ECD services. In so doing, inequality can be addressed; something which is clearly feasible in every corner of this nation.

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Investment in ECD must be treated as a matter of urgency, because every investment made will help target the underlying social and economic ills.

I have only been working in the ECD sector for two years and two months (as at August 2023), and am struck daily by the inequalities I see in the ECD centres I visit. I have realised that this sector is running on insufficient funds, while faced with an unbearable load of work that is needing to be done. I believe that quality education is not a privilege, but a birth right, belonging to anyone who lives in it, regardless of their race or socio-economic status; where you were born and the colour of your skin or your social status must not determine the quality of the education you receive. (I will refer to section 29 (1) of the South African constitution).

¹ Hall, K., Sambu, W., Almeleh, C., Mabaso, K., Giese, S. and Proudlock, P. (2019) 'South African Early Childhood Review 2019'. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town and Ilifa Labantwana

² Rudolph, N., Millei, Z. and Alasuutari, M. (2019) 'Data practices and inequality in South African early childhood development policy: Technocratic management versus social transformation'. *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 9(1), a756. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v9i1.756>.

KEYWORDS: early childhood development, disparities in ECD centres, inequality, ECD centre case studies, poverty, social and economic ills

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Danielle Moosajie (Director) – Arise

Stronger: A comprehensive toolbox for empowering family connection to allow children to succeed

The first 1000 days of a child's life is widely acknowledged as a crucial period for optimal physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. During this window, the quality of care, nutrition, and stimulation a child receives has a profound and lasting impact on their overall well-being. However, there is a growing concern about the lack of parental involvement during this critical phase and the potential repercussions it might have on a child's early development and future life outcomes.

The dearth of active parental engagement during the first 1000 days of a child's life has emerged as a significant challenge with multifaceted consequences. Parents' understanding of the importance of early childhood development, combined with various socio-economic factors and contemporary lifestyle trends, can result in suboptimal care and interaction during this crucial period. This lack of engagement can potentially hinder the child's physical growth, cognitive development, emotional resilience, and long-term educational attainment.

As Arise, through the years, we have seen children with severe behavioural problems, as well as kids as young as eight and 10 years old dropping out of school with little to no action from caregivers. At Arise, we wanted to address this as young as possible so that caregivers understood the vital role they play in their children achieving success because it all has to do with relationships. Arise focuses on the connection a child has with their primary caregiver and so we put together a box of low-cost resources with some fun explanations and ideas of how to use the items to foster family resilience at a time many families needed it most! Our family strengthening kits empower families in five different ways, to: *deepen relationships; nurture strengths in each other; grow problem solving skills; build resilience; and develop a sense of belonging within the family.* These five pillars underpin all the work done at Arise.

Our Family Strengthening Toolbox encompasses various essential elements of storytelling, play, creative problem solving and other experiential activities, which highlight the five key areas in the toolbox. The five key areas are focusing on family time, positive discipline, learning at home, coping with big emotions, and having difficult conversations. By integrating these components, the toolbox aims to foster strong family relationships, promote positive behaviour in children, enhance educational engagement, support emotional well-being, and facilitate effective communication within families.

Family strengthening is crucial for early childhood education as it provides a supportive and nurturing foundation that enhances children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, leading to improved educational outcomes and long-term success. We handed out over 400 kits since 2020 and have now added them as part of the graduation gift for all our families going through our family strengthening services. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with parents remarking on the tangible changes they have seen in their relationships with their kids, and the general atmosphere at home. Kids have been

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more co-operative as they look forward to spending time together as a family and parents have felt equipped to handle some of the hard conversations and difficult behaviour that inevitable emerges when all being cooped up at home for too long.

The outcomes of implementing this Family Strengthening Toolbox see improved family dynamics, enhanced parent-child relationships, increased academic engagement, improved emotional well-being, and effective communication skills within families. Families experience greater harmony, improved conflict resolution, and a nurturing environment for growth and development.

By embracing these components, families are empowered to build stronger bonds, promote positive behaviour, support educational growth, develop emotional resilience, and foster effective communication. The toolbox serves as a valuable resource for families seeking to create a harmonious and resilient family unit.

Family is the crucible of life. It is the starting point of all relationships and the course of our family life dictates many of our future paths. We need families that can weather the storms thrown at them and emerge capable as they adapt, engage, connect and learn to thrive in the midst of challenges. As Arise, we would love to see families strengthened throughout South Africa and would love to see these boxes in every ECD centre where families can engage and connect with one another in fun, interactive ways and use their own creative techniques to make the toolbox their very own. By having families strengthened, we can strengthen communities and see every child thrive.

KEYWORDS: resilience, family strengthening, success, positive behaviour, parent-child relationships

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Elisabeth van Wyk (Founding Director) – The Helix Collective

The Helix Collective – Crisis intervention funding for 0-5 year olds

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector is currently facing a significant crisis, with the learning outcomes of the children it serves hanging in the balance. Recent research, including the findings of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (2023) and the Thrive by Five Index, South Africa's inaugural nationally representative survey of pre-school children, has unveiled a distressing reality: a vast majority of the surveyed children lack the necessary skills for effective learning.

Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive focus on ECD. Unfortunately, the government's efforts to implement the required supports, crucial for achieving the objective of universal access to ECD opportunities by 2030, as outlined in the national ECD policy of 2015, are falling short. Regrettably, the current pace of implementation is inadequate and too slow.

Furthermore, the existing ECD subsidies are insufficient in terms of both quantity and coverage, as they reach only a fraction of ECD centres. Access to these subsidies is further hampered by a means test and inadequate allocations within provincial budgets. The consequences are dire: too many South African children commence formal education undernourished and lacking the developmental resources necessary to set them on a trajectory of educational attainment. This perpetuates the cycle of poverty from one generation to the next, exacerbating the already yawning inequality gap in South Africa.

To address this critical situation, it is imperative for the private sector to step in with crisis intervention funding. This funding should extend to both unregistered and registered centres, ensuring that each needy child receives the necessary learning subsidy. With this urgent objective in mind, the Helix Collective has been established. It serves as a comprehensive, national entity, dedicated to investing in early childhood education at scale.

The core aim of the Helix Collective is to provide essential funding to ECD centres, enabling them to enhance staff salaries to meet minimum wage standards and to increase spending on nutrition. This added funding is vital for ECD centres that struggle to meet these financial benchmarks with their existing resources. Additionally, the Helix Collective integrates other quality improvement components, such as vocational training, into its support structure.

While it is essential for other civil society actors to hold government accountable in alleviating the challenges faced by ECD, the Helix Collective calls upon the private sector to commit to crisis intervention funding. This collective effort is designed to bring about an immediate beneficial impact on the course of ECD in South Africa.

Importantly, the Helix Collective is not intended to replace or alter the existing governmental funding. Nor does it primarily seek to advance research or policy development, as numerous stakeholders are already engaged in these vital pursuits.

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Instead, the Helix Collective was established to facilitate substantial private sector investment that provides urgent relief in conjunction with the gradual governmental response.

In conclusion, the critical state of ECD in South Africa demands immediate attention. The Helix Collective stands as a mechanism for crisis relief, channelling substantial private sector investment to address the pressing needs of ECD centres and the children they serve. Through this collaborative effort, the trajectory of ECD in South Africa can be reshaped, offering a brighter outlook for generations to come.

KEYWORDS: ECD Funding, Crisis, Private sector investment, intervention, Helix Collective

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Jade Jacobsohn (Product Owner) – ECD Connect, DGMT

ECD Connect: A practitioner's pocket assistant

ECD Connect is a customisable digital application that is being developed in collaboration with behavioural scientists and early childhood development (ECD) specialists. Through extensive user research involving iterative testing of every feature set, ECD Connect addresses some of the most cumbersome aspects of ECD centre work. The web-based application helps principals and practitioners to:

Streamline administrative tasks: keep track of attendance, child progress reporting, schedules, and other important information all in one place.

Access lesson plans and educational resources: find multilingual age-appropriate activities and lesson plans to support the learning and development of the children in their care.

Communicate with caregivers: stay in touch with caregivers about their child's progress.

Keep growing professionally: take online classes and courses to build ECD expertise in their own time and at their own pace.

Collaborate with colleagues: Share resources and ideas with other ECD practitioners in their community.

While digital technology is not a panacea, it does offer a cost-effective way to expand and support principal and practitioner on-site efforts. Unfortunately, building such technology often comes with a hefty price tag. That is where ECD Connect comes in. It provides a free launchpad, addressing the standard core needs that most ECD centres have, while providing the freedom for them to personalise the platform, adding their own logo, colour scheme, and content — all managed through an admin portal.

KEYWORDS: technology, app, scale, quality, user-centric

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Dr Jessica Ronaasen (Postdoctoral Fellow) – Stellenbosch University

Leading the way: Nurturing success through management competencies in South Africa's ECD sector

Are you ready to uncover a vital opportunity for impact in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector in South Africa? Picture this: a world where young children thrive, where ECD centres are beacons of excellence, and where effective management competencies lead the way to a sustainable future, where ECD centres are businesses in their own right (Aubrey, Godfrey & Harris, 2013; Gamble & Soska, 2013; Wimpfheimer, 2004). That was the vision behind my thesis. The aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the essential management competencies of ECD principals to manage ECD centres in South Africa effectively. Engelbrecht's (2019:16) conceptual framework of management skills, functions, and tasks offers an interrelated conceptualisation of management, which is suitable for a social service setting such as a ECD centre.

In this quick presentation, I invite you on a thrilling journey to dive deep into the world of ECD principals, those incredible leaders who possess the key to unlocking the potential of our future generations. A collective case study design was utilised to gain the reflections and lessons learnt from 16 ECD principals and 14 social work managers working in the ECD sector, by conducting semi-structured interviews.

This is done by looking at the functions, skills and tasks of an ECD principal using key quotes to guide the story.

Get ready to explore the learnings of successful planning, organising, leading, and controlling within the ECD landscape. We will uncover the pivotal role of authentic leadership, distributed systems, and the need for financial literacy. This presentation offers an opportunity to consider the investment into ECD principal management as a form of support to these women who are human resources in the ECD workforce.

KEYWORDS: management, leadership, social enterprise, entrepreneurship, early childhood development

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Kirsty Paxton (Early Learning Design Manager) – SmartStart Early Learning NPC

Creating open-source materials to support quality early learning

In South Africa, it is estimated that more than a million children aged three to five are not in any early learning programme.¹ SmartStart is a non-profit organisation, established in 2015 to close the access gap to early learning opportunities. SmartStart works with partners to enable large-scale access to quality early learning through a national delivery platform which includes operational resources and play materials, licensing and quality assurance processes, in-person training, coaching and a network of peer support clubs.

In addition, SmartStart realises the importance of strengthening the existing Early Childhood Development (ECD) ecosystem in South Africa. To further support the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the many key organisations and individuals working towards these goals, we are making a number of our resources available digitally under a Creative Commons licence. We have also developed online learning modules on child development, active learning through play, creating safe and stimulating spaces, running a quality programme, safeguarding children, home learning, Early Learning Programme (ELP) registration and basic first aid. These modules include videos, activities, assessments, and idea sharing prompts which have been intentionally designed to be accessible to those with limited digital literacy and will be available on a variety of platforms (App, WhatsApp and web).

We would like to participate in the Khawuleza event to share our learning and enable as many ECD stakeholders in South Africa to be able to access these resources.

¹ <https://www.parliament.gov.za/press-releases/media-statement-basic-education-portfolio-committee-notes-progress-moving-early-childhood-development-basic-education>

KEYWORDS: quality early learning, online learning, open source, creative commons

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Karen Ross (Project Manager) – Mikhulu Trust

Book-sharing for Fathers – Helping fathers create nurturing and stimulating relationships with their young children

Since Mikhulu Trust's inception, participation in our parent-focused early childhood development programmes have predominantly been women – fathers have a unique and important role to play. Over the last two years, Mikhulu Trust has focused on supporting fathers to be more active and engaged in their children's lives. We have partnered with community-based organisations that work with fathers, and we have trained their community-based facilitators to run group book-sharing courses with men across the Western Cape Province.

Initiated through a research study in 2021, on the impact that the fathers could have on children's early development and risk factors for adopting violent behaviour, we developed the "Book-sharing for Fathers" programme. The research project was a collaboration between Mikhulu Trust, Sonke Gender Justice and the University of Cape Town and it enabled us to identify ways to engage with fathers through this programme.

Since then, we have focused on expanding the implementation of "Book-sharing for Fathers" and we have partnered with five father-focused non-profit organisations (NPOs) and their community-based facilitators. We train, mentor, support and provide resources to help them deliver the programme to fathers in their communities. The community-based facilitators work with fathers in small groups, giving them tools to engage their children in a way that helps build positive and reciprocal father-child relationships. The book-sharing programme also has huge positive benefits for children's early stimulation.

Since the NPOs have their own expertise in many other issues around fatherhood, they use the book-sharing programme as an opportunity to also engage men on other relevant challenges they might be facing as fathers. An example of issues discussed is the frustration they feel when they have the limited access to their children. These engagements are not formally part of Mikhulu Trust's work, but they are vital, and integrating this expertise within the book-sharing setting helps provide fathers with more holistic support.

Through the NPO partnerships, we would reach 350 fathers by the end of the year. The book-sharing programme is not a strategy to address all fathers' challenges in fathering; rather, it gives them a tool to create a meaningful relationship with their child, while also stimulating the child's early development. Anecdotally, this alone helps fathers to see themselves as more than just the financial provider for the child, and helps them to start conversations with the mother of the child on what a more meaningful fathering role could look like for their family.

KEYWORDS: fathers, book-sharing, gender

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Léanne Keet (Founding Director) – Masikhule

MASKOT – Keeping children on track

In a country where children from higher income families and communities are more likely to have access to quality Early Childhood Development (ECD), benefitting from early intervention programmes and strategies, and Occupational Therapy (OT) in particular, are sadly for the privileged few. Over the past 18 years, Masikhule, a registered non-profit organisation (NPO) based in the Western Cape, has been developing ECD programmes for community-based ECD centres within marginalised areas.

Ensuring all children benefit through active participation in ECD programmes has often excluded those children with learning challenges. The general lack of knowledge and insight of ECD practitioners (and parents and caregivers) into developmental delays and learning challenges – and a very limited referral base for children who show delays – prompted Masikhule to develop a variety of OT-based early intervention strategies. These strategies include Teacher Enrichment Training Workshops (TEW), community-based OT group therapy and mentorship, an OT-based Early Learning Programme, an online library of OT developmental activities and ideas, plus a free online App called MASKOT.

With community-based ECD practitioners playing a pivotal role in the process of keeping children on track and actively participating in holistic programmes, it became clear that it was the ECD practitioners themselves who needed to be upskilled in early intervention. In 2022, Masikhule developed its online Early Learning Programme MASKOT (Masikhule Keep On Track) so that anyone, anywhere and thus any child, anywhere, can benefit from OT-inspired Early Learning Programmes and a vast library of OT activities to develop and improve skills.

MASKOT is a free mobile and web-based knowledge and community platform which provides the user (be that an ECD principal or practitioner, caregiver or parent) with 30 Early Learning Programme themes suitable for the zero-to-three year and three-to-five year age groups. Each theme includes daily programme activity ideas and suggestions, posters, theme-related books, songs and rhymes, as well as classroom and teaching resources which can be made from recycled materials.

What makes MASKOT unique is that it provides a wide variety of OT videos, activities and monitoring and assessment tools to support the Early Learning Programme. Users have access to a wealth of ideas to stimulate and improve specific developmental milestones and skills, gaining insight and knowledge of what needs to be improved, why it is important and how to ensure success.

Although relatively new, anecdotal evidence has shown that the ECD practitioners using MASKOT improved in the planning and implementation of their Early Learning Programmes, were better able to plan and work as a team within their ECD Centres, valued the OT activity ideas and suggestions and most importantly, felt more confident in observing and empowered to improve specific learning and developmental skills. In addition, they have seen the positive impact of their improved teaching and intervention skills in the progress of the young children in their care, especially those who were struggling

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previously.

MASKOT is a free-to-use platform delivering relevant and engaging content within the ECD space. We firmly believe, however, that it is the Occupational Therapy content that is the catalyst for change and impact. Access to OT programmes should not be for the privileged few and although Masikhule is making a change through MASKOT and our combined early intervention strategies, there should be a shared commitment and collaboration between the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and OTASA (Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa) to ensure quality and impactful ECD education is within everyone's reach.

KEYWORDS: early intervention in ECD, occupational therapy for all, equal access to early intervention, holistic early learning programmes, keeping children on track

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Helen Donkin (Nutrition Associate) – Zero2Five Trust

Beefing up the ECD package of care – Khula Nathi

Early childhood development (ECD) centres are positioned to include services that vastly improve children's lives. At Zero2Five, we believe that nutrition services should be included as nearly one in three children under age five in South Africa are stunted, an indicator of chronic malnutrition, with a lasting impact on health, development, and education. In the Alfred Nzo District Municipality, many families live in extreme poverty and are vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition. The Khula Nathi project provides the tools, knowledge, and skills to bring nutrition surveillance to ECD centres. So far, we have trained 105 stakeholders including 78 ECD practitioners on nutrition, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), and tools to screen for malnutrition and, specifically, stunting. We have distributed these tools – Mid-Upper Arm Circumference tapes, weighing scales, and our specially designed height tool with in-built screening lines to detect stunting. Baseline measurements for over 1450 children were done and 185 children were referred to the Department of Health Primary Healthcare Centres for full nutritional assessment and treatment. We are establishing bidirectional communication between ECD centres and these Primary Healthcare Centres and will soon launch the CommCare app customised for our nutrition surveillance project. Through early detection at ECD centres, malnourished children can be referred for treatment and thrive during their early years and later in life.

KEYWORDS: ECD centres, basic package of care, nutrition, growth monitoring, stunting

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Olwethu Nqevu (Community Development Worker) – The Chaeli Campaign

The Chaeli Campaign ECD Outreach Programme: Upskilling parents and ECD Practitioners to better support children with barriers to learning

At The Chaeli Campaign, we believe that barriers to learning should not limit access to opportunities simply because the mainstream education system is poorly-equipped to accommodate the needs of these children. If children are excluded and denied educational opportunities from the beginning, they are unable to reach their full potential. Children with barriers to learning seldom get the necessary support in early childhood development (ECD) centres. This places them at a disadvantage when they start primary school and eventually, they give up on learning.

The focus of our ECD Outreach Programme is to upskill ECD Practitioners and parents so they can support children with barriers to learning. Our occupational therapist and community development workers do this through quarterly classroom sessions for three- to six-year-olds, capacity building of ECD Practitioners, and parent workshops. During these interactions we share information about how children develop and how to assist in areas where they need extra support. When required we link children up with their local health and education departments. We promote effective school-to-home skills transferral through distributing educational resources and encouraging ECD Practitioner-parent communication.

Since 2010, we have established trusting working relationships in three resource-constrained communities in Cape Town, and we currently support 48 ECD classes. Parents and ECD Practitioners report to value the information and practical ideas shared. Over the years of working together, ECD Practitioners have been observed to gain confidence in their ability to provide necessary support and will reach out when further assessment or referral is warranted. Through sharing our ECD Outreach Programme model with you and making resources related to our work freely available for download on The Chaeli Campaign website, we call on other organisations to join us in providing necessary support to children with barriers to learning throughout South Africa.

KEYWORDS: children with barriers to learning, ECD practitioner, capacity building, parent support

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Julia Norrish (Executive Director) – Book Dash

Book Dash – Making beautiful, open books for the ECD sector

Owning books from a young age is an essential tool in early development and parent-child bonding. However, in South Africa an estimated 70% of children have never owned a book by the time they enter school (National Reading Survey, 2023). Books produced by commercial publishers are often unaffordable and irrelevant, which keeps their benefits exclusive to the minority, compounding inequality.

Book Dash is a social impact publishing organisation that designed a quick, effective model of creating brand new, open licensed children's books that anyone, anywhere can use to enhance their early childhood development (ECD), literacy or parenting programme.

The books are freely available to read, adapt, download and print. They are used extensively in local and global efforts to increase access to books and representative stories for all children. We publish across South Africa's official languages and have worked in partnership with over 175 organisations to distribute more than three million books to pre-school children to own.

We do this because owning books in the home while a child is very young is shown to increase their development, deepen bonds and chances of later academic and economic success but, "early book ownership" is often not an element included in educational interventions.

In this quickfire presentation, we will show how the books are made, who is using them and call on those working in ECD to use these high-quality resources to lift the quality and impact of your offering to young children.

KEYWORDS: early years book ownership, social impact publishing, books, early literacy, book-sharing

Dr Giulietta Harrison (H.O.D. Foundation Phase) – SANTS Private Higher Education Institution

Recognition of Prior Learning for access: Piloting an approach to ‘open doors’ at undergraduate level

This presentation will describe a pilot project related to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) run at a private higher education institution. The purpose of the pilot was to provide access at undergraduate level for students who would not normally qualify for entry into the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in Foundation Phase Teaching owing to inadequate Matric results or life experiences that prevented further studies. RPL is a social justice issue owing to South Africa’s history of apartheid that deprived large sectors of our society of a solid foundational education. Twenty (20) candidates were selected and underwent an initial document analysis. Two candidates took up the challenge and went through an initial self-directed tool in order to ascertain their eligibility. The two candidates participated in a year-long RPL programme for access which allowed them to bridge the gap between their current qualifications and the demands of a degree. Action research was employed to adapt the programme during implementation. Whilst both candidates succeeded in completing the programme, one did so with greater ease. A number of aspects of the programme were adapted during the pilot but would not be feasible should the programme be upscaled. For example: additional opportunity to submit lesson plans; mentorship related to the submission of the Portfolio of Evidence; and a second opportunity to rewrite two fundamental modules. The pilot programme has now been extended to include students from the B.Ed. in intermediate phase teaching. This is a first attempt at opening doors to undergraduate RPL and means that potential teachers who would not otherwise be able to access a degree can now do so. By succeeding in providing access, SANTS is demonstrating that other training institutions can do something similar and open the doors to quality early childhood education (ECE) teacher training.

KEYWORDS: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), access, bridging the gap, action research

Shonisani Agnes Mulovhedzi (Senior Lecturer) – University of Venda

Effective leadership and management in Early Childhood Development centres: A case study of Mvudi cluster

Effective leadership and management play a crucial role in early learning centres, shaping the overall quality of education and developmental experiences provided to young children. Most Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre leaders lack effective leadership qualities to lead the centres. The study aimed to explore the influence of effective leadership and management practices on early learning centres, focusing on their influence on children's educational outcomes, staff morale and parent satisfaction. Effective leadership and management are essential in ECD centres because leaders must create, assist, inspire and motivate a staff team and set an example of excellence in practice, knowledge and caring. The study adopted transformational theory that sees leaders serve as examples to their followers. The researcher used a qualitative research method and explorative research design to conduct the study to get in-depth information regarding effective leadership management in ECD centres. Eight participants were interviewed and two focus group interviews were conducted to collect data. All participants from the Mvudi cluster, Thohoyandou area, Limpopo, are the population of this study. Purposive sampling was used to select four ECD centre leaders and four practitioners from four ECD centres. Of the selected centres, two are registered with the Department of Basic Education, and two are self-funded. The data was analysed thematically. The study considered voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, potential for harm, and results communication. The study revealed that effective leadership and management also contribute to staff morale and professional growth. The implication of the study showed supportive leaders who provide mentorship, ongoing training opportunities, and recognition for achievements foster a sense of job satisfaction and commitment among ECD practitioners. Leadership and management enhance staff retention rates, promote a positive work atmosphere, and ultimately benefit children's learning experiences. The call to action is that leadership and management in ECD centres should promote and support quality education that can build holistic development of the children.

KEYWORDS: early learning centres, educational outcomes, holistic development, leadership, practitioners' morale, transformational leadership

Lyndsey Petro (Head of Partnerships) – Grow ECD

Down to business: Unlocking success for ECD centres by adopting a business mindset

Traditional views have often limited Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres to being perceived solely as community services or charities. This mindset has not served us well. Post the promise of the Children's Act (2005), we are still struggling to deliver quality education to those in low-income communities. The recent ECD Census and Thrive by Five reports show that we are not making sufficient progress towards equitable access for all, nor are children achieving their developmental milestones. For example, just 55% of children attending early learning programmes are on track in emergent literacy and language by age five (Giese et al., 2022). A key problem is that we continue to solely approach ECD centres as non-profit beneficiaries.

We believe that to achieve impact in terms of quality education and children's readiness for school (especially at scale), a paradigm shift is required: Operating ECD centres as sustainable social enterprises. When profit meets purpose, we can deliver sustainable impact and fair employment conditions for ECD practitioners, which are essential for maintaining quality education.

Addressing the challenges faced by the ECD sector requires that we start seeing ECD centres as potentially thriving small businesses which deliver essential community services. We need to support centres with the practical application of business principles (implemented not at the cost of impact, but rather to increase impact). By embracing a business mindset, we can drive ECD centre sustainability, enhance service delivery, and professionalise the sector.

Grow ECD's Impact Report (2019) shows that our approach leads to improved learner outcomes as well as increased sustainability for centres. Through our holistic development programme, Grow ECD offers a comprehensive package of support designed to shift mindsets and equip ECD centre owners and teachers with the skills, tools and resources they need to deliver 5-star early learning, while also operating their pre-schools more sustainably. There are currently 130 ECD centres on the Grow Small Business Programme, 439 centre owners have participated in our ECD Small Business Accelerator since its launch in 2023, and there are 7000 ECD centre owners that have registered to use the Grow Centre Management App. Each of these users is benefiting from a programme, training, resource access and/or functionality that aims to nurture both their heart for children and their head for business.

In this presentation, we will showcase some of our most effective tools and resources and share the principles and approaches which everyone can adopt. Specifically, we will highlight our ECD Small Business Accelerator, Centre Management App, and accessible small business loans as key components of our approach. This presentation aims to challenge perceptions and prompt reflection on how we view ECD centres as "beneficiaries" and the implications, and opportunity, for our role in developing capacity, skills, and expertise when we view them as small business owners instead. We call on other organisations in the sector to join us to empower ECD centres as social entrepreneurs. When we do, we will see a triple

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impact – small business development, job creation (especially for women) and improved education outcomes.

KEYWORDS: centre management, financial sustainability, leadership development, professionalisation of ECD, small business

Jessica Blom (Programme Manager) – Centre for Early Childhood Development

Enhancing access to quality early childhood development (ECD) services in marginalised communities: The Kouga ECD Project

This conference presentation presents an overview of the activities and impact of a five-year early childhood development (ECD) project conducted by the Centre for Early Childhood Development. The Kouga ECD Project aims to improve young children's access to high-quality ECD services in marginalised areas of the Eastern Cape. In particular, it focuses on strengthening ECD centres, which is crucial to ensuring quality ECD because they serve as the foundation for a child's overall development. Well-equipped and supported centres provide a nurturing environment where children can receive essential early education, fostering cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth.

The Kouga ECD Project employs an integrated and comprehensive approach to working with centres, encompassing both formal and informal ECD centres. Project activities target focus areas that will increase ECD centre functioning and enhance early learning programmes. This includes professional development training for ECD centre teachers and assistants; the establishment of a team of local ECD facilitators; leadership and management training for principals and governing body members; fire, safety and health equipment provision and training; support with registration processes; mentoring and support; provision of education resources; infrastructure upgrades; accessing nutrition support; and creating an ECD community.

The impact of this project has shown significant results. The ECD centres have shown great improvements from the baseline assessments to assessments at the end of Year 1 and 2. The assessments illustrate how the ECD centres have been strengthened and progressed each year, across a number of indicators.

There are a number of lessons to take away from the Kouga ECD Project, from the successes as well as the challenges experienced. Providing comprehensive, long-term and in-depth interventions and support to ECD centres have shown to create meaningful change within them. Beyond improving the day-to-day functioning of the ECD centres, building an ECD community goes further, enhancing social capital and promoting community development. To achieve this, long-term integrated intervention is critical.

KEYWORDS: ECD centres, quality ECD, impact, integrated approach

Queen Baloyi (Director) – Khanimamba Training and Resource Centre

Implementation of the ECD Mobile programme in Northern Limpopo by Khanimamba Training and Resource Centre

Early childhood development (ECD) plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's future success. However, limited access to quality ECD services hampers the growth and potential of children in many rural communities. By quality ECD services, we are referring to a situation whereby ECD centres are accessible to all children, are well resourced, with trained practitioners, and are impactful in ECD initiatives, and there is equality in the treatment of children. Quality ECD services do not reach or are inaccessible to poor and vulnerable communities in the rural area of Limpopo Province.

To address this issue in Northern Limpopo, Khanimamba Training and Resource Centre participated in an ECD Mobile programme, which aims to increase access to ECD services to less privileged communities. This programme leverages the benefits of using a customised truck, mobile technology and community engagement to extend the reach of ECD initiatives and empower caregivers, parents and educators with the necessary tools for fostering optimal development.

The significance of the ECD Mobile programme cannot be overstated. The implementation of the ECD Mobile programme provides a critical window of opportunity to the children in the far northern areas of Vhembe District Municipality to break the cycle of disadvantage and provide equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background and geographical location. By reaching less privileged communities, the programme has thus managed to address inequalities in ECD services provision and mitigate the long-term consequences of inadequate early development. The impact has to date proven to be far-reaching, fostering cognitive, social, and emotional growth in children, while empowering caregivers and educators to play an active role in nurturing children's potential.

The ECD Mobile programme deploys a customised mobile application, catering to parents, caregivers and educators. This application provides age-appropriate activities, educational resources, and guidance on critical developmental areas. Community workshops and training sessions have also been rolled out to enhance awareness and knowledge of ECD. This has been followed up by engagements with the communities where the programme has been implemented to collect programme impact related data. Encouragingly, the programme's implementation impact findings have been positive. Caregivers reported increased confidence and knowledge in supporting their children's development. Children exhibited improved cognitive abilities, language skills and social interactions. Furthermore, the programme fostered a sense of community engagement and collaboration among caregivers and educators, creating a supportive network for ECD.

Building upon the success of the ECD Mobile programme, future endeavours should focus on scaling up the initiative to other regions in Limpopo and other parts of rural South Africa. This requires partnerships with other related organs of government, the security and health clusters, non-governmental

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organisations, and technology providers to expand its reach to more underserved communities. Continuous evaluation and improvement of the ECD Mobile programme application, based on user feedback and research findings, will be a crucial factor in advancing the ideals of the scaled up provision. Ensuring long-term sustainability includes securing funding at a larger scale, establishing local support structures, and integrating the programme within existing ECD policies and frameworks.

In conclusion, we at Khamimamba Training and Resource Centre have a strong belief that the ECD Mobile programme stands as a beacon of hope in addressing the inequalities that hinder ECD. By up scaling the ECD Mobile programme to the less privileged communities in South Africa and leveraging on funds that can be made available by government, other funding agencies, mobile technology and community engagement, this programme's positive impact and future potential can make it a critical component in shaping a brighter future for generations to come. This will also increase the number of children accessing the ECD service as it is a known challenge in most communities.

KEYWORDS: access, equality, impacts, relevantly resourced

Nicole Biondi (Independent Consultant focused on Advocacy) – The Do More Foundation

Child-centred climate action: Where the most vulnerable become the most valuable

Children are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change, which can have long-lasting consequences on their physical health, mental well-being and social and cognitive development. A child's earliest years are the most valuable time for development and essential to human flourishing and thriving cities. In the majority world (Global South), rapid urbanisation and inadequate infrastructure exacerbate the challenges of climate change. The unique influence of climate change on young children is often excluded in consideration of responses to these critical issues.

This workshop aims to explore how cities can prioritise the unique needs of young children in their climate policies and strategies. It will build upon the challenges and opportunities identified in Capita's research and previous workshop in South Africa. Some of these include:

The lack of processes and platforms for children's voices to contribute to issues concerning their wellbeing; and the opportunity to increase children's and families' participation in decision-making;

The opportunity to develop mechanisms to institutionalise the responsibility for mitigating the influence of climate change on children within cities and local government structures;

Opportunities to learn about scalable and effective community-led approaches from different contexts.

In addition, early stage thinking on the establishment of a South Africa Early Childhood Climate Action Coalition spearheaded by the Do More Foundation in partnership with Capita will be shared.

This session hopes to bring together diverse voices to rethink traditional approaches and generate innovative ideas for centring the unique needs of young children in climate change responses. By exploring the urgent and essential aspects of climate action, we aim to co-develop practical strategies for well-being and resilience of children in urban and peri-urban environments.

KEYWORDS: climate change, climate resilience, child-centred climate action

Roxanne Long (Postdoctoral Fellow) – South African Numeracy Chair Project, Rhodes University

Exploring the possible enablers of a numeracy and literacy integrated Family Maths Storytime Programme

In this presentation, we provide preliminary findings from running the South African Numeracy Chair's Family Maths Storytime Programme (FMSP) with Grade R families in two schools. The programme merges literacy and numeracy learning in the early years (pre-Grade 1) and involves parents/caregivers participating in the programme run by the teacher. The FMSP is centred around three 'early number' storybooks, written and designed implicitly to encourage 'dialogic reading' and to create opportunities to recognise numerals and number names, subitise, count, and perform basic calculations at an age-appropriate level. These books are supported by numeracy and literacy integrated activities and resources, such as card games and flash cards. Data was generated through interviews with the facilitating teacher and with participating parents (three of the 25 caregivers who attended consented to interviews), and all ethical considerations and permissions have been obtained via the university and from the study participants. Initial findings from this small sample have been framed by a sociocultural theoretical perspective, as we draw on the work of Graven & Jorgensen (in press) who explore "the re-constitution of the primary habitus into a secondary habitus that integrates school numeracy/literacy practices" (n.p.).

Findings from preliminary analysis of data will form the focus of this presentation, with insights offered in terms of the possible enablers afforded by participation in the FMSP, looking specifically at the nature of the learning described by parents, and in turn, exploring the potential for the integration of home and school practices, and numeracy and literacy learning practices. From the initial findings, it is recommended that home-school partnerships are strengthened in ways which support the integration of literacy and numeracy practices in the early years.

KEYWORDS: early years, Grade R, teaching, learning, integration, numeracy, literacy, home-school partnerships

Petrina Pakoe (Director), Amelia Koeries & Thandi Mtombeni – Peninsula School Feeding Association

Enhancing early development nutrition

Malnutrition is caused by poor nutrition. A bowl of pap or sandwich (a staple diet fed in many ECDs) does not equate to proper nutrition for mental and physical development. In South Africa (SA), one in four children (27%) under the age of five are stunted. This is a sign of chronic malnutrition. This statistic did not change for the country. Malnutrition is preventable. Our early childhood development (ECD) services have a significant role to play. They however need support and it is a collaborative approach that requires a holistic approach to addressing all aspects of the child's life. Funding provided by the government and the allocation provided for food is not sufficient and, in some cases, the money is not always used in the required way. ECDs require assistance to develop nutritional menus that meet the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of learners within the budgets they have available.

It has been proven that a well-balanced diet within the first 1000 days of a child's life can address stunting and many other developmental challenges. It is far more difficult to address especially stunting once the child is in school already. Peninsula School Feeding Association (PSFA) aims to work with unregistered ECDs in rural areas to try and address the gaping gap that exists primarily in rural communities to address malnutrition.

PSFA and its collaborative partners have embarked on providing holistic support to the ECDs they support. Not only nutritional support (stock and menu to serve a well-balanced diet) is provided but also working alongside health, infrastructure, psycho-social and training partners to ensure a holistic approach to the development of the ECD learner.

KEYWORDS: nutrition, malnutrition, stunting, collaboration, menu development, resource allocation

Léanne Keet (Founding Director) – Masikhule

Occupational Therapy intervention in Early Learning Programmes

In a country where higher income young children are more likely to have access to higher quality early education, early intervention programmes and Occupational Therapy (OT) in particular, are sadly only available for the privileged few. Over the past 18 years, Masikhule, a registered non-profit organisation (NPO) based in the Western Cape, has been developing Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes for community-based ECD centres – with ECD practitioners gaining valuable insight into the value of purposeful play on development and how to implement well-planned, holistic and insightful programmes within their ECD centres.

Ensuring all children benefit through active participation in ECD programmes has often excluded those children with learning challenges. The lack of knowledge and insight into developmental delays and learning challenges, and a very limited referral base for children who show delays, prompted Masikhule to develop and integrate OT-based early intervention strategies within its Early Learning Programmes. With community-based ECD practitioners playing a pivotal role in the process of keeping children on track and actively participating in holistic programmes, it became clear that it was the ECD practitioners themselves who needed to be upskilled in this area.

The aim of our early intervention programme is to ensure ECD practitioners in community-based ECD centres follow a holistic Early Learning Programme, are provided with insight into essential child development and more specifically, how developmental milestones and skills affect learning and interaction with the environment. It includes the identification of developmental and learning delays and strategies to work on those specific areas within the pre-school setting, ensuring that all learning is inclusive.

Masikhule's early intervention strategy includes Teacher Enrichment Workshops (TEW) which focus on specific areas of development that have been identified, through regular screening and observation of children, to be areas of concern e.g., posture and core stability, eye-hand coordination, crossing the midline, visual motor integration, spatial concepts, etc. These regular TEW sessions are followed up with mentorship visits by our OT at the ECD centres to ensure support and guidance during implementation. Through these interventions, practitioners are empowered to truly understand development, to gain insight into the link between early development and learning, to recognise delays (without labelling children), and to improve and develop these areas of delay within their own ECD environments.

By developing OT-inspired Early Learning Programmes, offering Teacher Enrichment Workshops, and offering a vast library of OT activity ideas and resources to develop and improve skills, we have seen significant improvement in the skills of ECD practitioners to observe, identify and successfully rectify barriers to learning. Results of screening of groups of children before and after OT intervention programmes have provided valuable evidence of how OT intervention within Early Learning Programmes

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can play a vital role in keeping children on track, and in many cases ensuring children thrive!

While much attention is given to literacy scores in Grade 4 – with 81% of pupils not able to read for meaning, according to the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study released in May 2023 – those in the ECD sector agree that it is the quality of early learning experiences within the zero-to-five-year age group that holds the key to their later success.

However, Masikhule believes that equal access to Occupational Therapy for ALL children within the early years will be the catalyst to ensure all children thrive. Masikhule is doing its part by sharing impactful OT-based early intervention content through its online platform called MASKOT. To achieve this on a national level and at policy-making level, there needs to be purposeful engagement between the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA) and the Department of Basic Education.

KEYWORDS: early intervention in ECD, occupational therapy for all, equal access to early intervention, holistic early learning programmes, keeping children on track

Tinotenda M Muringani (Intern Researcher) & Tshepo Mantjé – Equality Collective

Making local government work for early childhood development

This project draws from existing learnings from the 'Make Local Government Work for ECD Campaign' coordinated by the Movement for Real Reform for ECD.¹

Access to quality early childhood development (ECD) services in South Africa is limited, especially in vulnerable communities, due to the lack of effective integration of ECD into local government's policies and the barriers in place for ECD registration.² This hinders the provision of safe and vibrant care and learning spaces for young children, perpetuating inequities,³ and hindering the realisation of the right to development for all children in the country.⁴

This project aims to address the limited access to ECD services and programmes in South Africa, and particularly address the opportunity presented at local government to create safe and vibrant care and learning spaces for young children by prioritising ECD in their municipality Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), and Budgets, while collaborating with local ECD forums to support data collection, implementation and coordination.⁵

Some of the activities that have been carried out to achieve this goal include, making submissions to the Local Government Municipal Planning and Performance Management Regulations, and workshops designed to capacitate and support ECD practitioners to become active participants in local government advocacy. Currently, we've workshopped ECD forums in seven municipalities on the role of local government in providing for and expanding ECD services. To date, the 'Make Local Government Work for ECD Campaign' has been active for three years, supporting comprehensive IDP submissions in seven local municipalities. Some key accomplishments thus far include the following: some municipality IDPs mention and recognise ECD as an essential part of community development, but we are still working towards getting clear commitments; the commitment of Breede Valley Local municipality to draft an ECD policy; we have supported comprehensive IDP submission in seven local municipality IDP review processes.

Moving forward, we intend to continue advocating for ECD by actively engaging with councillors and local government officials. The call to action is to encourage ECD practitioners to participate in public consultations during the IDP review process annually, to ensure that immediate concerns and unmet needs are included in the plans. The campaign has shown the need for increased collaboration and engagement between ECD practitioners and local government to enhance access to quality ECD services.⁶ It highlights the importance of advocating for ECD reforms and mobilising practitioners to address community-specific problems. By mobilising stakeholders and fostering collaboration, it is possible to create significant improvements in the ECD sector and promote the well-being and development of South Africa's young children at community level.

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KEYWORDS: local government, early childhood development, access, removing barriers for registration

Rebecca Hickman (ECD Advisor) – SmartStart Early Learning NPC

Investing in home and community-based early learning programmes as a strategy for quality access

Since 2015, SmartStart has successfully scaled up home and community-based (HCB) early learning programmes (ELPs) as a strategy for quality access. Its model is based on a desktop survey of the literature relating to the ingredients of quality in ELPs.

SmartStart's literature review suggests that the ability of ELPs to positively influence child outcomes depends on the presence of quality rather than on the setting per se. The components of quality found to mediate improved child outcomes – such as adult-child interactions, structured routines, dosage, materials and training – are not unique to centre-based provision and can be supported effectively in HCB settings, including homes.

Under the SmartStart social franchise model, Franchisors and regional branches recruit, train and license practitioners to deliver the same evidence-based programme for three- to five-year-olds, supported by a national network of Coaches and Clubs. The programme is provided in all modalities with a focus on HCB. A 2018 external evaluation of child outcomes in SmartStart programmes (n=199) using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM), found that the proportion of children who were 'Achieving the Standard' for ELOM Total score, increased from 32% of children at baseline to 62% of children at endline.

In South Africa, the early learning access gap for three- to five-year-olds alone amounts to 1.3 million children, and poor children constitute about two-thirds of this number. The South African government's goal is to achieve universal access to early childhood development (ECD) by 2030. However, policy and programming solutions that do not respond to the particular challenges of under-resourced communities, and do not harness the assets of those communities, are likely to perpetuate existing patterns of exclusion.

Shortage of appropriate land and facilities in urban areas, alongside low population density in rural areas, often makes it less viable to build new ECD centres in order to unlock access. Furthermore, the speed of scale-up of ELPs is substantially slowed if it relies on the high cost and long lead-in times of new infrastructure projects.

This analysis suggests that the most practical, affordable and equitable way of ensuring that quality early learning opportunities reach today's young child, is through the rapid expansion of ELPs using existing premises, including homes. SmartStart provides a practical and tested example of how this can be done at scale.

The finding that quality early learning can be provided in HCB settings, has important implications for government policy-making. In particular, it supports the case for early reforms towards more inclusive

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regulatory and funding regimes, as well as for strategies to close the access gap which recognise and maximise existing community assets.

KEYWORDS: home and community-based early learning, quality early learning, closing the access gap, childminding settings

Ayesha Carrim (Lecturer) – University of South Africa

Developing ECD teachers' knowledge and skills to meet the demands of quality education in a rural context

The rural context in South Africa has many intersecting barriers that complicates the provision of quality education. The literature points to early childhood development (ECD) in rural South Africa as highly vulnerable, and these vulnerabilities affect quality early education (Aubrey 2017, Adebunmi, Aina & Bipath 2022). Hannaway et al. (2019) in their analysis of early childhood education in rural areas noted that conditions of poorly qualified teachers, poor curriculum implementation and poor school management all work against quality teaching. The aim of this paper is to explore the high educational demands placed on ECD teachers within the context of a rural area in the Northwest province. The theory of lived experience for flexible education by Palmer (2011) was used to make sense of demands made on ECD teachers. The study was part of Community Engaged Scholarship project UNISA which received ethical clearance from the institution. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with four ECD teachers as well as observations of classrooms and learners was used to make sense of the demands placed on the teachers. The findings showed that departmental support was narrowly focused on curriculum coverage, performance and accountability, to the detriment of the broader issues of concern. For example, the department established workshops that merely dictated what needs to be completed on the weekly schedule per term. This type of support was undertaken once in a term followed by departmental visits to check for compliance. What was missing is the support regarding content for quality curriculum implementation and attention to broader conditions that make it difficult to achieve quality ECD – poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, language differences, poor knowledge, and skills to support vulnerable children, lack of support leading to mental health issues among ECD teachers. The demands and expectations of ECD teachers in the rural context is disconnected to the realities of the support they receive. Taking into account the harsh realities faced by ECD teachers in rural communities it is recommended that greater partnerships should be forged between communities, schools and the department of education and other departments implicated in ECD. Funding should be available for community development of the basic and the school infrastructure as well as resources suited to young children's development and learning. Education sector planning should allow for a substantive budget for ECD in rural areas. With regard to the curriculum implementation, there should be exploration of funded professional development for quality ECD not just by the department. ECD teachers should be supported to develop sustainable professional learning communities of practice that meet regularly to improve their practice. All departmental officials should undertake ECD professional development short courses to reskill or upskill. Future research can explore existing models for its adaptations or new models for quality ECD in a rural context.

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KEYWORDS: ECD teachers, rural, quality education, challenges, funding, resources

Anya Morris (Programme Director) – Africa A+

WhatsApp: A training tool that supports learning, implementation, and community building

This presentation covers the use of technology to train and support ECD educators. Africa A+ Schools, a non-profit organisation (NPO) working in the Eastern Cape, began to use WhatsApp as a facilitation and support tool during Covid-19, when face-to-face facilitation was not possible. Email, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom and Teams were quickly discounted as most educators had no computer access, were unfamiliar with the technology, or the data costs were too high. WhatsApp was the preferred method of communication as the educators had cell phones and already used WhatsApp as a personal communication tool. A+ began by creating and posting images and text each week on established WhatsApp groups e.g., photographs of how to set up a creative art activity accompanied by text explaining the pedagogical value of the activity. The purpose of the posts was to share pedagogical knowledge and to give the teachers ideas on what to do. The educators, in turn, responded by posting photos of activities they were implementing with the children. A+ and other members of the WhatsApp group commented on each posting. A+ offered suggestions that expanded the educators' knowledge, attitudes, and skills, and motivated further on-site implementation.

The WhatsApp postings and responses created:

- A positive feedback loop in that one educator's posting and resultant affirmation motivated other educators to implement, photograph, and post.
- A community of ECD educators who supported each other.
- An increase in the educators' pedagogical understanding of how to support early childhood development in practical ways.
- Trust and confidence developed between facilitators and educators, as well as between educators from different communities and contexts.

The findings suggest WhatsApp as a cost-effective, easy-to-use tool that complements and extends workshop facilitation and motivates on-site implementation in ECD settings. It confirms that, even in impoverished communities, it is possible to use technology effectively to support teachers' professional development and build their technology skills.

KEYWORDS: technology, WhatsApp, teacher training tool, building an ECD community

Lungile Mdluli (ECD Officer) & Mpho Papale – UNICEF

The importance of play in early learning: Knowledge, attitudes and practices of parents and caregivers with children birth to six years old

The aim of the study was to explore the knowledge, skills and practices of parents and caregivers. to provide a foundation for targeted play-based learning interventions. Additionally, to emphasise the importance of parental programmes for the purpose of expanding early learning and development initiatives rooted in play-based learning principles.

Neuroscience explains that playful experiences allow children to gain executive functioning skills that will be needed later in life. Parent (and primary caregiver) and child interactions in the first few years are critically important for early language, cognitive, socio-emotional development and later, in early grade school performance. However, parents' time spent playing with young children is often limited. This indicates a clear need to change prevailing parenting practices to support early learning.

The nation-wide study included both rural and urban sites in all nine provinces. A mixed method design following an exploratory sequential approach was utilised. Data, both quantitative and qualitative, was collected using focus group discussions, interviews and a parent survey. A random and convenient sampling methods were employed to identify the 1429 participants, representational of the various living standard measurement indicators. The findings were analysed using the early learning development standards as outlined in the National Curriculum Framework for children birth to four years, along with the components provided by the Nurturing Care Framework was used as a lens with which to analyse the findings. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from Pharma Ethics.

Study findings substantiate that the importance of play is not widely understood. Parents viewed their responsibilities largely in relation to the child's needs for health, nutrition, protection, self-care and socialisation. The parent survey measuring attitudes towards play was positive. A total of 92% of parents agreed that it was important to play with your child, as it is fun and promotes bonding. However, a greater portion of parents indicated that children up to the age of two were too young to play, thus the use of technology was commonly used to replace play time. Though some of the knowledge and attitudes were positive, this did not translate to practise, the parent survey indicated that some parents' and caregivers did not play with their children. In support of literature, there is still a lack of knowledge amongst parents on the link between learning and play and parental engagement. Thus, parents still believe play is better facilitated through bought toys. The contextual barriers to the study included a lack of social cohesion and safe spaces for young children to play as such (76%) play inside, lack of time, affordability, literacy levels, mental health issues, and lack of confidence in their parenting.

KEYOWRDS: knowledge, attitudes, practices, parenting programmes, play-based learning, early learning

Danielle Moosajie (Director), Alexa Russell Matthews & Siyabulela Tungani – Arise

Ready-Set-Go: Empowering school readiness in children through collaborative parent-child programmes

Ready-Set-Go is a school readiness programme that encompasses emotional literacy and parent relationships as it plays a vital role in preparing children for a successful educational journey. This abstract provides an overview of an integrated approach that focuses on fostering emotional intelligence in children while strengthening parent-child relationships to enhance school readiness.

Emotional literacy, the ability to understand and manage emotions, has been recognised as a critical aspect of children's development. In this programme, emotional literacy is given prominence through various activities designed to promote self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy and effective communication. Storytelling, art therapy and role-playing exercises are utilised to help children identify and express their emotions appropriately. Additionally, mindfulness techniques are introduced to support emotional self-regulation and stress reduction.

Furthermore, the programme emphasises the importance of parent-child relationships in facilitating school readiness. Parental involvement is encouraged through workshops, interactive sessions and home-based activities that promote positive parent-child interactions. These activities aim to enhance the quality of parent-child relationships, strengthen attachment and foster secure emotional bonds. Parents are provided with strategies to effectively support their child's emotional development and school readiness at home.

The reason for this is that the traditional approach to school readiness often focuses solely on the child's cognitive and academic skills, neglecting the significant influence of the caregiver-child relationship and socio-emotional development. As caregivers play a vital role in shaping a child's early experiences and attitudes toward learning, there is a need to bridge the knowledge and skills gap between caregivers and children in the context of school readiness. This study aims to address this gap and explore the need for a comprehensive school readiness programme that actively involves both the child and their caregiver.

The outcomes of the programme demonstrate significant benefits. Children participating in the programme exhibit improved emotional competence, social skills, and self-esteem. They demonstrate higher levels of emotional regulation, empathy and problem-solving abilities. Moreover, children with positive parent relationships display increased confidence, motivation and readiness to engage in their educational environment. Parental involvement leads to better communication between parents and teachers, creating a collaborative support system for the child.

In conclusion, an integrated school readiness programme that focuses on emotional literacy and parent relationships offers a comprehensive approach to preparing children for school. Including caregivers in school readiness programmes has numerous implications for both policy and practice in the field of early

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childhood education. Recognising the critical role caregivers play in a child's development, such programmes can bring about positive changes in education policies and practices. This includes parent/caregiver engagement frameworks, an inclusive approach that ensures that caregiver involvement is accessible and encouraged for all families, regardless of their socioeconomic background or cultural differences, training and support for caregivers, and promote programme flexibility to accommodate caregivers' schedules and preferences. This may involve offering various modes of participation, such as workshops, online resources and in-person events. Policies should advocate for an integrated curriculum that provides caregivers with a clear understanding of the skills and concepts being taught in school, enabling them to reinforce learning at home. By nurturing emotional intelligence and strengthening parent-child bonds, children develop the necessary skills to navigate social interactions, regulate emotions, and thrive academically.

KEYWORDS: parent-child relationships, emotional literacy, parent relationships, school, success, thrive, mental health, behaviour, prevention, integrated approach, parental involvement

Monique Visser (Lecturer & Researcher) & Dr Shelley O'Carroll – Stellenbosch University

Teachers at the core: Exploring the usefulness, feasibility, and implementation of an early literacy and language programme

Access to Grade R did not lead to better outcomes for the poorest quintiles (Van den Berg et al., 2013). Addressing the untapped potential of young children requires comprehensive training and equipping the entire teaching labour force with essential skills to enhance their effectiveness (Kotze, 2015). To improve the quality of early childhood development (ECD) provisioning for young children, there is a need for evidence-based, contextually-relevant and affordable teacher development programmes that support quality language teaching and can feasibly be used by teachers in low-resource contexts (Jilink, Fukkink, & Huijbregts, 2018; Phillips, Zhao & Weekley, 2018).

This study, grounded in the ecological systems theory which illuminates the intricate interplay between individuals and their environments, explored teachers' experiences with Little Stars, an affordable language and literacy programme for four- to five-year-old children. The programme includes teacher guides, classroom resources, and training, with a focus on ease of implementation, contextual relevance, coverage of language and emergent literacy domains, and fostering positive and meaningful learning experiences for children. A combination of convenience and purposive sampling was used to recruit 51 teachers from ECD Centres in Afrikaans and Xhosa communities located in the Western Cape.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating results from training feedback, self-reports and reflections. Feedback from participating teachers was analysed according to the Kirkpatrick model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006) to assess satisfaction, learning and implementation. The study was funded by the British Academy with ethical approval from Stellenbosch University.

Teachers expressed high satisfaction, motivation, and preparedness for programme implementation, with utilisation of activities and materials varying initially but consistently improving over time. Thematic analysis revealed the following main themes: confidence and competence, resources and activities, programme-specific skills, knowledge, intentions to change practice and challenges. Subthemes included storytelling, roleplay facilitation, language and literacy insights, and engagement and interaction in the classroom.

These findings underscore the value of carefully designed materials and training models in enhancing teachers' confidence, knowledge, and implementation of language and literacy programmes. This study contributes to the discourse on evidence-based, contextually-relevant teacher development programmes, ultimately fostering enriched language teaching for young children in resource-constrained contexts.

To maximise the impact of early childhood education, stakeholders should prioritise investment in

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training that is both research-informed and contextually relevant, while also providing sustainable support to enhance effective engagement during the early years.

KEYWORDS: language, early literacy, teacher development, pre-Grade R, programme evaluation

Helen Donkin (Nutrition Associate) & Julika Falconer – Zero2Five Trust

Khula Nathi – Bringing growth monitoring to ECD centres

Many households in the Alfred Nzo district municipality live in extreme poverty and therefore are vulnerable to malnutrition. Stunting, which is low height for age, is a long-term measure of inadequate nutrition in children and is related to poor cognitive, social, educational, and ultimately economic development in the life of the child and society.¹ One in four children in South Africa are stunted.² That means one in four children could suffer from poor health, poor educational attainment and development, resulting in societal instability and reduced economic prospects.¹

ECD centres are well-placed for interventions addressing childhood malnutrition, however, malnutrition screening requires specific equipment and skilled fieldworkers. The Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) tape is an easy-to-use screening tool used to identify wasting in children, but there is no easy-to-use screening tool to identify stunting in children. Additionally, barriers remain in the bi-directional referral systems between children at risk of malnutrition and health facilities.

Khula Nathi aims to reduce malnutrition rates for 5000 children in the Alfred Nzo district municipality through early detection and referral by nutrition surveillance at 300 ECD centres, using easy-to-use anthropometric tools. Practitioners at the ECD centres are equipped with skills to screen for wasting and stunting and are empowered with nutrition and WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) knowledge. The CommCare app is in the process of being customised to record growth measurements and to strengthen the bi-directional communication between ECD centres and Department of Health (DoH) primary healthcare centres (PHCs).

Identification and treatment of malnutrition, in addition to preventing malnutrition at ECD centres, can ensure children reach their full developmental, educational and economic potential.

Tailor-made height monitoring tools have been distributed to the 84 ECD centres in the first two clusters, in addition to MUAC tapes and weighing scales. 105 stakeholders, including 78 ECD practitioners, DoH clinicians and Community Health Workers (CHWs) have been trained in these tools, nutrition, and WASH. Baseline measurements have been taken for over 1450 children at 84 ECD centres. Encouragingly, 185 children with malnutrition have been identified and referred to local PHCs for full nutritional assessment and treatment. ECD practitioners and CHWs are now aware of the importance of adequate nutrition for young children.

Continued and expanded collaboration with DoH is required, especially harnessing CHWs to strengthen bidirectional referral pathways between communities and PHCs. Support and capacity building at ECD and DoH centres will drive this project forward. While this work continues, many children's basic nutritional needs are still not met, placing them at risk of malnutrition, therefore increased funding is needed for feeding schemes at unfunded ECD centres as a preventative measure.

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KEYWORDS: ECD centres, basic package of care, nutrition, growth monitoring, stunting

Dr Mary G Clasquin-Johnson (Senior Lecturer), Colwyn D Martin & Hasina Banu Ebrahim (ECD Research Professor) – University of South Africa

The rhetoric of workforce professionalism: An analysis of South African early childhood policy

The professionalism of the early childhood workforce is central to the raising the quality of child and family outcomes. South African early childhood workforce policies reflect an alignment with the Global Education 2030 Agenda and literature that calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all by improving the quantity and quality of the early childhood workforce. The aim of this paper is to report on a rhetoric analysis of two key policy texts viz. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and The Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Educators (MRQECDE), to make sense of how early childhood teacher professionalism is understood within workforce reform. Informed by the work of Joan Leach, we argue that policies strategically use discourses of professionalism to persuade and interpret social problems through rhetorical devices, such as the pathos of the vulnerable and disadvantaged child, a logos of quality education and an ethos of concern for transparency and the public good of society. We employed rhetoric to identify the features of the argumentative process to understand how policies work to structure thinking, systems of representation and perceptions about the early childhood workforce's professionalism. Our findings show firstly that for early childhood workforce professionalism, both texts use different evidence to make a case for why it is good to invest in developing a quality workforce. Secondly, both texts show converging and differing views on the nature of teacher professionalism and therefore the line of action for reforms are similar and different. Thirdly, we engage with the realities of public management of the early childhood sector and the notions of responsabilisation and surveillance that it brings with it. In examining the persuasive nature of the policy texts, we conclude that workforce reform will continue to invite contestations due to the complexities of the nature teacher professionalism for early childhood in the South African context. This implies the urgent need for capacity building of all those involved in ECD workforce policy development and those at the frontline.

KEYWORDS: professionalism, early childhood workforce, rhetoric analysis, pathos, logos, ethos

Ally Connelly (Lecturer/Student) – University of the West of Scotland

[Re]imagining parent and teacher understanding of parent participation in an ECCE setting

The importance of parental involvement in children's education from the start of the education journey has been established by global research, with agreement that it impacts upon educational future successes and/or failures. Despite this rhetoric, there is limited research in South African Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres that explores the ways in which parents should participate meaningfully in early education, to create socially cohesive and transformative environments for children, and by extension their communities.

This interpretive, qualitative research endeavours to understand how agency can be shifted to parents and teachers by moving practice from involvement to active participation in ECCE. The theoretical frameworks of Pedagogy-in-Participation (Formosinho & Fromosinho), Communities of Practice (Wenger) and Humanising Pedagogy (Freire) support the shift to meaningful participation to embrace including parents in the ECCE setting to realise the possibilities of connecting with the community.

The basis for this presentation is the exploration of one dataset of ongoing research: semi-structured interviews conducted in one ECCE centre, in Lavender Hill. The Cape Peninsula University of Technology provided ethical clearance, and all participants consented to be part of the research. Interviews were conducted with seven parents and five teachers. Their understandings of participation as connection and relationship were interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis. The interviews provided rich data on the value parents place on the importance of meaningful connection(s) between them and the centre. The findings revealed the importance of parent agency in strengthening community ties and social cohesion.

This ongoing research aims to develop a model of parent participation by democratically including parent voices, contributing to the ongoing, iterative, unfolding of a parent participation model in the ECCE centre.

KEYWORDS: early childhood education, parent partnerships, communities of practice, democracy in Early Childhood Care and Education

Malibongwe Gwele (Researcher) – Children's institute, University of Cape Town & Linda Biersteker (ECD Specialist & Researcher)

Building a common understanding of quality ECE: Hearing from practitioners, caregivers and children

Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy (SIPP) is an international research project with partners from Edinburgh, Brazil, Palestine, eSwatini and the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town, which aims to identify and develop safe, inclusive, participative learning and teaching strategies that can be sustained and implemented in under-resourced contexts. International and South African policy commitments and guidelines for implementing quality early education highlight the importance of and need for safe, inclusive, and participatory practices that are culturally meaningful and contextually appropriate. While these issues are much debated, the perspectives of the most affected stakeholder groups – early childhood practitioners, caregivers and young children – are often missing. This presentation draws on the findings of a community case study undertaken in the disadvantaged Vrygrond community in Cape Town, which serves as part of the broader study, with ethical approval from the Department of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town. We sought to understand how early childhood development (ECD) stakeholders made meaning of our key concepts to inform our understanding of inclusion, participation and its intersection with safety.

A case study approach was used because it is particularly suitable for holistic consideration of the phenomenon and answering 'how' and 'why' as well as 'what' questions. This approach can become part of a critical pedagogy in early learning settings, where early childhood education practitioners, children and parents and other local stakeholders engage in ongoing, challenging and transformative dialogue, which in turn provides the potential to improve local practices, challenges top-down policy implementation, and fosters quality early learning practice which is valued by all stakeholders.

The community and the study population were purposively selected to provide insights on policies, systems and the implementation of participation and inclusion on the ground. Three key concepts provided the conceptual framing for the study: safety, participation and inclusion. This conceptual framing informed tools for data collection and informed coding in the analysis phase.

We conducted five community organisation interviews and 13 focus groups with advisory group committee members, ECD practitioners, ECD principals and caregivers of children. Data was also collected from five groups of children aged four to six years using Persona Doll facilitation. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and was triangulated across three researchers and with the community advisory board.

We found that where children are in environments that feel safe and inclusive, they are more likely to become actively involved (participate). Generally, respondents considered ECD centres as safe spaces where expression of feelings is encouraged. Barriers to participation included diverse languages, adults' attitudes toward both children and each other, and practitioners themselves not feeling confident in

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promoting participation of children. Broader issues of overcrowding in pre-schools, exposure to violence and unsafe conditions can make it difficult for children to use their agency and participate fully at school, at home and in the community. This is particularly difficult for children with special needs. Participation by caregivers in early learning is driven by their sense of being included and their understanding of the value of early learning experience for children. The relationship between caregivers and the ECD centre is critical for promoting participation and inclusion.

The study demonstrates that to improve the quality of ECE we need to work with actors on the ground to co-create understanding of safe and inclusive spaces for children and caregivers to participate, including building on opportunities that already exist.

KEYWORDS: contextually and culturally meaningful, perspectives, community case study, critical pedagogy, play-based methods

Dr Jessica Ronaasen (National Programmes Lead) – The Do More Foundation, & Linda Biersteker (ECD Specialist & Researcher)

Evaluation of the EAT LOVE PLAY TALK pilot Parent Education Programme

In South Africa, malnutrition poses a severe challenge, being one of the primary contributors to childhood illness and mortality. Approximately 27% of South African children suffer from stunting due to inadequate nutrition during their early years (South African Demographic and Health Survey, 2016; Thrive by Five, 2022). Malnutrition is a complex issue that demands urgent attention. To address this crisis effectively, nutrition education must be prioritised at community level and integrated as a core element of parent support initiatives. Harnessing indigenous knowledge and leadership within communities supports caregivers with the knowledge and skills needed to promote the healthy growth and development of their children.

The South African-based EAT LOVE PLAY TALK Parent Education Programme is an exciting initiative aimed at engaging parents and caregivers of children up to five years old in conversations and activities centred around healthy eating, loving relationships, playful learning, and language development. The programme follows a train-the-trainer approach, involving local early childhood development (ECD) principals, practitioners and playgroup facilitators. Principals and practitioners play a pivotal role in facilitating the parent engagement groups, fostering meaningful interactions and nurturing a supportive environment for parents and caregivers, while their groupwork and facilitation skills are continually developed and strengthened through training and practical experience of facilitating EAT LOVE PLAY TALK.

Research shows that community-based parent education programmes, led by local facilitators, can be highly successful. The inclusion of local parents or practitioners as group facilitators in community settings has become an important element of parent education initiatives. EAT LOVE PLAY TALK sessions provide a platform for participants to share their own experiences and gain new information based on health guidelines and research.

This pilot project covered four communities in South Africa, with master trainers providing online training sessions to equip facilitators. A total of 572 caregivers of children aged zero to five years were reached through 22 ECD centres.

Pre- and post-tests, as well as qualitative feedback questionnaires were utilised. The evaluation findings were promising, with improved nutrition knowledge and positive feedback, highlighting the programme's effectiveness in promoting healthy behaviours and nurturing parent-child relationships. The pilot project has provided valuable insights into local facilitation, capacity building of master trainers, and the effectiveness of the EAT LOVE PLAY TALK programme. Lessons learned from the design and creation of programme materials will be shared, benefiting social work educators and group work specialists working in community-based contexts.

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The EAT LOVE PLAY TALK programme is important due to its focus on ECD and its goal of enhancing parents' knowledge in essential areas like health, nutrition and responsive caregiving. The programme's light touch and inclusive approach make it accessible and enjoyable for diverse communities. Its design incorporates effective engagement strategies, incentivising attendance and promoting group learning to drive positive behavioural changes. Additionally, its adaptability allows it to cater to different community contexts, making it a valuable programme and practical lessons to be shared with South Africa's ECD sector.

KEYWORDS: pilot programme, parent and caregiver education, train-the-trainer, nutrition, play, language development

Sibongile Mahan (Lecturer) – University of South Africa

Translanguaging as a medium of communication in multilingual peri-urban pre-school classrooms

Language issues have always been a bone of contention. South Africa (SA) has not been spared, as contestation over the Language of Teaching and learning has been part of the discourses on language use. SA has eleven official languages, but only English is given elevated status, at the expense of the rest, especially regarding educational matters. However, there is an increasing drive to value and support the development and learning of children in the early years, which includes the language children use for learning. Research shows that there are benefits in learning in a language that is familiar to a child, a home language. This qualitative study explored how practitioners support language development of children in multilingual pre-schools – thus finding out about the choice of language usage. The theoretical framework which underpinned the study is a combination of the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism and the Social Justice theory. This study was conducted using the social constructivism paradigm. The contact persons at the sites were given an ethics letter of approval from the university and a written declaration, outlining how the rights of human subjects would be upheld. The study involved six practitioners from three pre-schools which chose English as the language of teaching and learning. The findings were that practitioners often used translanguaging to communicate in multilingual pre-school classrooms in peri-urban areas. These findings suggest that practitioners need to adjust how they manage multilingualism in the context of effective use of translanguaging, for the realisation of possibilities and successes of teaching in multilingual pre-schools. The implications of this study are that early childhood teacher education programmes should include language development programmes and skills in teaching English to EFAL learners to effectively use the language, so that practitioners are capacitated to use the language proficiently in multilingual settings in pre-schools.

KEYWORDS: translanguaging, practitioner, support, language development, multilingualism

Chinedu Okeke (Professor) – University of the Free State

Effective professional development for early years education practitioners in disadvantaged communities: Challenges and strategies

This study examined the challenges that impede effective professional development (PD) provisioning and the strategies for improvement of 211 practitioners spread across 45 early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres in the disadvantaged communities of the Motheo District Municipality, Free State Province. A convergent mixed methods research design was followed, with a questionnaire supplemented by semi-structured interviews. I used SPSS version 25 software to analyse the quantitative data, and the mean and standard deviation results answered the research sub-questions. The qualitative data was analysed thematically. Results and findings indicate numerous constraints to providing effective PD for practitioners. These include a shortage of qualified facilitators, budget constraints, community civil disturbances, lack of adequate infrastructure, lack of government commitment to PD, failure to pay practitioners' salaries, poor working conditions of practitioners, shortages of quality and variety of tools that can be used to observe and supervise practitioners, and lack of adequate feedback on the implementation of new skills and its impacts on children's learning. An analysis of practitioners' responses identified several strategies to facilitate the provisioning of their PD to meet their needs. Such strategies include keeping PD programmes simple, organising resources to assist practitioners in implementing the instructional priorities, the district office's concerted effort to support practitioners' adoption of instructional priorities through training programmes, and creating a feedback loop. Other strategies that were recommended are that administrators keep in mind that instructors will still require assistance in monitoring the implementation of changes in the second year, allowing practitioners to participate in decisions that affect them, making provisions for adequate PD logistics, avoiding civil conflict taking place, and providing adequate professional opportunities, like that in other professions. I argue that mitigating community-based practitioners' challenges is germane to achieving quality ECCE and contributing to sustainable community development.

KEYWORDS: community-based centres, challenges, early childhood care and education, mitigating strategies, practitioners, professional development

Wilna van Rooyen – Vivlia Publishers

Inclusion of 21st Century skills in effective ECD programmes for children aged four to six years

The Dinamo and Compass ECD programmes offer an integration of exploratory activities in Early Childhood Development (ECD) and the provision of guidance to practitioners with varying training and resource backgrounds. Additionally, it emphasises the inclusion of 21st Century skills in effective ECD programmes for children aged four to six.

Currently, practical guidelines for integrating the teaching of 21st Century skills into ECD programmes are lacking. As a result, there is insufficient emphasis on exploratory learning as a foundational element for nurturing critical thinking.

Our aim was to create an ECD Programme that aligns with the National Curriculum Framework for children birth to four years. The primary focus was on incorporating Exploratory Learning to promote critical thinking, while also addressing the curriculum gap for five- to six-year-olds.

The developed programme offers practical lesson plans that provide clear, step-by-step guidance for implementing exploratory learning activities. To aid practitioners with diverse linguistic backgrounds, guides were produced in multiple languages, complemented by QR codes containing audio and video support.

The programme underwent piloting in two ECD centres with varying resource availability. Initial feedback from practitioners highlighted the ease of incorporating and expanding exploratory learning activities, thanks to the comprehensive guidance provided by the programme. The integration of digital technology through QR codes was particularly valuable for practitioner support.

Differentiated activities within the programme allowed practitioners to tailor the pace of learning to individual students. However, practitioners noted the need for a glossary of 21st Century skill terms within the programme guides.

Moving forward, we plan to continuously refine the programme based on feedback from practitioners. We will continue exploring further ways to leverage digital technology (such as videos, audio, and QR codes) to enhance interactive practitioner support. Furthermore, we will be expanding the integration of 21st Century skills to include computational thinking and experiential learning into our ECD programmes.

KEYWORDS: early childhood education, play-based learning, holistic development, school readiness, 21st Century skills

Hasina Banu Ebrahim (ECD Research Professor), Sheila Drew & Rene King – University of South Africa

The development of the professional teaching standards for the ECD educator workforce in South Africa

The aim of this presentation is to share preliminary findings in building early childhood development (ECD) Professional Teaching Standards (PTSs) for the ECD educator workforce in South Africa (SA). This study is part of the larger Funda Udlale Nathi Project, implemented by the VVOB in partnership with Ntataise, Neil Butcher and funded by the LEGO Foundation. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) and South African Council for Educators (SACE) are also collaborators on the project. ECD PTSs development is led by the F.U.N. consortia made up of Saide, BRIDGE, National Early Childhood Alliance (NECDA) and a lead researcher (first author). The standards development for the ECD educator workforce is an important milestone that is responsive to the concerns raised about the quality of early learning experiences and the competence of the workforce to change child outcomes. This and related concerns have been noted in previous studies (Urban 2011; Kaul et al. 2022; LEGO/DBE ECD Census 2021; World Bank PIER 2022). Data was produced through a literature review and initial stakeholder consultations informed by a phenomenological lens with ethical clearance from the University of South Africa (UNISA). The literature review was organised for the pragmatics of understanding and making choices for the SA PTSs in ECD. The main question was as follows: What does the literature review (of international and national policies, guidelines, frameworks) suggest about key issues for the development of the SA ECD PTSs. At the time of the abstract submission, 25 documents were reviewed. There were two initial stakeholder consultations. In the BRIDGE National Community of Practice (three hours – fully online), there were 93 participants. They were from a range of stakeholders and sectors including government, funders, resource and training organisations, other non-profits involved in ECD, education institutions and ECD practitioners. For the breakaway sessions, interactive jamboards were used to generate data on the purpose and nature of PTSs and its application in SA. In the NECDA consultation (an hour and a half), 45 members in person and five virtual members from the network participated in plenary and breakaway sessions. The latter had an average of eight participants. The findings from the international review showed that standards are developed in relation to country priorities, visions for children, principles/values and minimum expectations of what the ECD educator workforce must know, be able to do and position their professional selves. Influential frameworks have been used to package standards in ECD themes or in professional development domains which cover ECD themes. The SA review showed that there is a lack of a shared vision driving ECD workforce development. The sectoral responses have led to fragmentation. For the ECD educator workforce the content for the PTS is dispersed in different ECD policies, regulations and reports. It was also found that the SACE standards were generic and need to be revisited in the light of competence building of ECD educators. The initial consultations with the sector showed that there is

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recognition of the importance of ECD PTSs that should have multiple purposes to advance the sector as a profession. It was further noted that the sector favoured a developmental approach to the application of PTSs. Many questions were raised and further engagement with the sector is required to move towards a more nationally agreed ECD PTS framework that meets the demands of different modalities, settings and levels implicated in ECD educator development.

KEYWORDS: early childhood educators, professional teaching standards, South Africa, competence, ECD workforce

Rachel Neville – JET Education Services

The role of play in the development of executive functions in age three- to five-year-olds in South Africa: The LEGO PLAY 2.0 Project

This paper describes how executive functions develop in the context of playful pedagogies in South Africa. Research has shown that play-based learning can improve a child’s academic performance and personal development. From infancy, children have a natural ability to learn about the world around them through play. Executive functions are a set of three related but distinct cognitive processes, namely, response inhibition/inhibitory control, working memory and cognitive flexibility. The executive system involves the prefrontal cortex, which is the last area of the brain to fully develop; its development is stimulated by exposure to play.

This study will involve an analysis of the “Thrive by Five” national survey of three- to five-year-olds in South Africa, using the Early Learning Outcome Measure (ELOM), which includes measures of executive function. ELOM measures gross motor development, fine motor coordination and visual motor integration, emergent numeracy and mathematics, cognition and executive functioning, emergent literacy and language.

JET Education Services is working with the LEGO Foundation to refine play-based learning tools, such as classroom observation and early childhood development teacher survey tools. ELOM data has been conducted in over 85 ECD centres in Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and the Northern Cape to assess learning for children between the ages of four to five years old. The study will analyse the development of executive functions in three- to five-year-olds from both resource-scarce and resource-rich environments, and discuss implications for the impact of play-based learning.

KEYWORDS: executive functioning, play-based learning, PLAY

Mildred Bopoto (Programme Manager), Barbara Stemmert – Ikamva Labantu Charitable Trust

Ikamva Labantu Principals Training Programme: Making a difference

In the townships of South Africa, Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres generally started as child minding or day-care centres. However, when the Children's Act 38 of 2005 came into effect, the law required all places caring for seven children or more to legalise what they were doing; they had to register their educare as a partial care facility. This was an onerous undertaking for many of the principals. They were not well informed about the various facets of this process, nor how to effectively manage a childcare facility. Many principals feared being closed down, leaving the children stranded and the staff without a basic income.

Before the inception of the Ikamva Labantu Principals Training Programme, a team of Community-Based Workers (fieldworkers) were in place, going from one educare to the next, helping the principals' put systems in place to meet the government's norms and standards. However, this was not sustainable as most of the principals lost interest after the Community-Based Worker left. Many ECD centres backslid, including registered sites. There was a need to equip principals with the knowledge and skills to meet the norms and standards, and to maintain them.

Ikamva Labantu observed the many challenges principals faced and their thirst for knowledge. Principals attended many training opportunities which focused predominately on childcare and not facility management in a childcare setting. This led Ikamva Labantu to develop the first of its kind, a skills development programme specifically for principals who manage in-centre ECD programmes. The principals' training programme was piloted in September 2012 with 10 principals from the Mfuleni area. This programme was well received, and the word spread. Year-on-year applications stream in to attend this programme. Over time, the content which is informed by the unit standard SAQA: 244478 was accredited.

Upon completion of the course, it is expected that principals are capable of operating educare centres according to the government's norms and standards, while incorporating a business approach and most importantly ensuring the care and stimulation of young children. They need to be well versed with their roles and responsibilities. Firstly, having a functional parent committee that provides oversight to the daily activities i.e., governance, HR processes, financial systems, administrative systems, and the implementation of the learning programme. Secondly, the employment of competent and skilled staff. Lastly, but paramount, practitioners must receive support in providing a nurturing and stimulating environment for children.

This programme is currently only offered in Cape Town, however if funding permits, it will

be beneficial to offer this programme to ECD principals across the Western Cape Province and, in time, across the country.

KEYWORDS: principals, management, norms and standards, registration, training programme

Neliswa Gqoli (Lecturer) – Walter Sisulu University

Diverse mathematics learning styles in rural Early Childhood Development centres of OR Tambo District, Eastern Cape Province

Children learn differently, so early childhood practitioners need to know and understand different mathematics learning styles for the benefit of all children. Therefore, this study explored how diverse mathematics (in the form of emergent numeracy) learning styles were used by children with the assistance of practitioners in rural Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres of OR Tambo Inland District, Eastern Cape Province. This was a qualitative study that was conducted in two pre-schools. The study adopted Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism which emphasises the collaborative nature of learning by the construction of knowledge through social discussion. The study's sample included four practitioners from two rural ECD centres which were purposefully selected as information-rich participants of the study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and observations.

The findings of the study revealed various factors that hindered children of rural ECD centres from learning using different learning styles. This included: a lack of space for creating an effective learning environment, a shortage of learning material, and a lack of proper training on ECD which made practitioners use traditional instructional practices. Based on the findings, the study recommended that practitioners should be equipped with knowledge and skills for developing an effective learning environment to use various teaching strategies that will make children learn mathematics diversely in classrooms of rural ECD centres. The study's findings have implications for teachers, policy, and practice. Therefore, policymakers and educational leaders should discover areas of focus including diverse learning styles in the curriculum.

KEYWORDS: learning styles, early childhood, auditory, visual, kinaesthetic, play, ECD centres

Dr Monica Stach (CEO) – Cotlands

Toy library norms and standards: Debate, discuss and learn

Cotlands started its first toy library in 2008 in Hlabisa, Kwa-Zulu Natal, which is still operating today. The report of the last financial year shows that our toy library programme owns and operates 12 toy libraries and mobile toy libraries, and that 37,537 toys were lent out by 344 members across South Africa. In addition, more than 50 toy libraries have been set up in partnership with others over the last five years.

According to the National Integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy, “Toy libraries provide developmentally appropriate educational play materials to early childhood development service providers, parents or children. It may offer play and learning sessions, toy-making demonstrations, individual lending and/or lending to early childhood development service providers” (Republic of South Africa, 2015:14). Despite toy libraries being recognised in the policy, and already contributing to and strengthening ECD programmes, government is not registering, expanding or funding toy library programmes.

This session aims to create an opportunity to discuss and debate toy library norms and standards, and to educate and raise awareness about the importance of toy libraries in the ECD ecosystem. Toy libraries play an important role in supporting the implementation of early learning programmes by providing play materials and equipment, as well as training and guidance on how to include the play materials in the programme.

Toy library norms and standards were developed in 2018 in collaboration with the Gauteng Department of Social Development (DSD), Toy Library Association South Africa (TLASA) and Cotlands to assist with registering the toy library programmes. This document is a valuable resource to those operating toy libraries and those registering and funding toy libraries. The call to action is to train government officials on toy libraries so that toy library programmes can be registered and funded, as well as raise awareness and consult with non-profit organisations operating toy libraries around the minimum norms and standards.

KEYWORDS: toy libraries, resources, non-centre based programme, play materials, toy library norms and standards

Julie Hay (Executive Director) – Singakwenza Early Childhood Education

Are commercially-produced resources essential for an emerging literacy programme?

What does the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) have in common with packaging that you would usually discard? Would you believe me if I said that it was achievement in literacy?

The PIRLS assessments focus on children in their fourth year of schooling, as this is the time when children have supposedly learnt how to read and are ready to read to learn. The assessments measure the children's ability to read with understanding, and the latest results show that less than 19% of children in Grade 4 in South Africa are able to read for meaning in their mother tongue (Mullis et al., 2023). It is clear that many of our children are missing out on some critical foundational skills that our early childhood development (ECD) centres need to provide, and a lack of resources is regularly cited as one of the problems.

The emergent literacy skills are developed in the pre-school years through open-ended learning and play, and practitioners need to provide numerous resources and materials for their children to explore, especially if they want to provide a wide variety of learning experiences for the holistic development of young children. However, so many young children in our country spend their days in a barren classroom and an empty playground, as the high cost of educational toys makes them unavailable to crèches, schools and homes with limited financial resources. Children who should be actively learning through play are restricted to reciting the alphabet, the days of the week, the months of the year – meaningless repetition in hope that they will eventually learn how to read with understanding.

Instead of trying to get commercially produced resources into every ECD centre, we suggest that handmade resources can develop the emergent literacy skills just as well as purchased toys. If the practitioners understand which skills they are developing in their children, they will be able to make the resources themselves using household packaging that is freely available. This process is also much more sustainable, as practitioners do not need to rely on funding to replace materials that get lost or broken. These handmade resources are not just for impoverished communities, however. According to sales data from The Toy Association, over \$104 billion was spent globally on toys in 2021, including educational toys. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2020), 90% of all toys are made from plastic and 80% of them end up being incinerated, or in landfill or the ocean. Repurposing household packaging can therefore help to reduce the environmental impact of classroom resources.

This presentation will share some ideas that Singakwenza Early Childhood Education has successfully used in over 70 creches to develop emergent literacy skills, using handmade resources.

KEYWORDS: PIRLS, emergent literacy, skills, resources

Candice van Rooyen (Senior Trainer) – Protective Behaviours Southern Africa (PBSA)

Child protection is everyone's business – A Protective Behaviours approach to personal safety

Protective Behaviours is an internationally acclaimed prevention education programme presented by adults to children in a clear and non-confronting way, using play as a vehicle for learning imperative safety skills.

Since its introduction to South Africa in 2009, Protective Behaviours has trained more than 4000 professionals (educators, social workers, therapists, psychologists, etc.) working with children – delivering this programme to an estimated 300,000 children.

With statistics showing alarming rates of child abuse, and more specifically child sexual abuse, in South Africa, it is paramount that children are given ownership of their own safety, making them less likely to become victims. Abuse has indelible and far-reaching effects on a child's learning, development, mental health, physical health and social relationships. Research shows troubling correlations between child sexual abuse and later behavioural, emotional and academic difficulties. Therefore, Protective Behaviours aims for PREVENTION, wherever possible.

Grooming, online predators, bullying and cyber bullying are also modern buzz words indicative of the multitude of unsafe situations children can fall victim to today. Empowering children and building resilience, self-esteem and confidence, the Protective Behaviours programme uses unique strategies that can also be extended to embrace anti-bullying, drug awareness or youth suicide prevention programmes.

Protective Behaviours believes that early intervention is key and equips children from as young as four years with a set of skills that could safeguard them against being victimised. It further aims to open the door to discussions that can encourage disclosures of prior abuse.

The programme does not use scare tactics, instead it employs games, stories, crafts and role play to teach invaluable skills and strategies to identify unsafe situations, possible grooming by predators and be proactive about their own safety. Unique strategies, including the definition of feeling safe, body ownership and consent are taught in an age-appropriate way, yet Protective Behaviours is not a sexuality education programme and is thus appropriate and necessary in an early childhood development (ECD) setting to lay the foundation for later conversations.

Professionals working with children attend a twelve-hour workshop conducted by one of 25 Senior Trainers countrywide and must adhere to set criteria before qualifying as Practitioners of Protective Behaviours. Practitioners can be found all over South Africa as well as in Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. These practitioners deliver the programme to the children they serve in pre-schools, primary schools and ECD centres, and are represented in reputable organisations such as Child Welfare,

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Childline, Lifeline, the Department of Social Development, SOS Children's Villages, Kidsafe SA, CMR and FAMSA, to name but a few.

All children deserve to live lives free from the traumas of any form of abuse hampering their future academic, behavioural and emotional success. Equipping more professionals to use the practical, fun, yet vital strategies of Protective Behaviours in ECD settings will allow for prevention of abuse, by making the children they work with and care for less-likely victims. Protective Behaviours can empower those working in ECD to, in-turn, empower the children they serve against abuse in an age-appropriate manner, while retaining their youthful innocence.

KEYWORDS: safety, protection, empowerment, resilience, prevention

Michaela Ashley-Cooper (Research Manager) – Centre for Early Childhood Development & Thozama Nomnga (Community Leader) – Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor (FEDUP)

Improving early childhood development in informal settlements: An innovative multi-country pilot project

Worldwide, nearly a billion people, mostly women and children, live in informal settlements; with an estimated 21.6 million young children (aged between 0-4) living in these areas. This exposes these young children to a multitude of adverse experiences, a lack of basic services, and limited access to quality ECD opportunities. In spite of these circumstances it is consistently seen that communities living in informal settlements are natural innovators and problem solvers. Yet very little is known about community-led solutions that seek to enhance ECD and caregiver wellbeing in Africa in informal areas.

To fill this gap, an innovative project is currently being implemented in three countries across Africa. This project is a partnership between SDI (Slum Dwellers International), CECD (Centre for Early Childhood Development), and self-organised communities in the three target countries, with support from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation.

The project, being conducted in Cape Town, South Africa as well as Dakar, Senegal and Kampala, Uganda, aims to work with SDI's network of women- and community-led 'federations' (which function similarly to community forums) to address the challenges faced by people living in informal settlements in Africa, particularly women and children, focusing on early childhood development and caregiver well-being.

This is done through various activities: the project provided a platform from which members of identified communities collected information and data on what types of interventions would best respond to the needs, conditions and priorities of caregivers within their communities as well as the existing ECD services within the informal settlements in the areas. With technical support, these communities designed customised interventions to improve the wellbeing and development of children under 6 years of age, to promote ECD and caregiver wellbeing, and to improve linkages to local governments to drive policy change for children and caregivers in informal settlements. The community-led interventions, currently being implemented in each country, aim to expand the knowledge base of community-led ECD initiatives, increase the quality and access to ECD programmes in informal settlements and promote this approach to ECD programming in informal areas.

The presentation, co-presented by Michaela Ashley-Cooper (a CECD representative) and Thozama Nomnga (a federation representative), will discuss the main tenants of the project: the approach, methodology, and main activities of the project, as well as discuss the process and results from the community-driven surveys (on child and caregiver wellbeing and community needs in terms of ECD) conducted in each country, and the three community-driven ECD projects being implemented and supported in each country.

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The presentation will showcase the capacity of communities in informal settlements to improve ECD and caregiver well-being through community-led initiatives, community-led data collection, and community-led policy advocacy, with the support of various collaborative partners. By so doing, we will call on all those working in the ECD sector to consider including this approach to development work in their own ECD programmes and projects.

KEYWORDS: ECD, community initiatives, informal settlements, networks, caregivers

Nokubonga Purity Hlongwane – Zero2Five Trust

Overcoming barriers to ECD registration for the delivery of effective ECD programmes in rural settings

Early childhood development (ECD) centres are required to register with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) as partial care facilities and additionally need to register as an ECD programme. Once these two steps have been taken, they may qualify for the ECD subsidy for eligible children. To register, centres need to complete and submit several forms and documents, some of which present a great challenge. The main barriers to registration are the practitioners' level of education and access to basic infrastructure to take part in such a formal and complex process, hence they require assistance. The main fallout of unregistered ECD programmes are reduced livelihoods of practitioners, compromised health and safety of children, lower quality of education, and exacerbated inequality. The inability to register means that particularly ECD centres that cater for children from low-income families are unable to access a government subsidy designed for exactly this group of children.

The aim of this presentation is to report on an initiative to assist unregistered, rural ECD centres for ECD registration in line with the ECD registration framework to create more safe spaces for effective ECD programmes, as ECD practitioners require assistance in understanding and facilitating the necessary registration requirements. The Nelson Mandela Foundation's Vangasali campaign¹ aims to document every registered and unregistered ECD programme to assist them in meeting the norms and standards as set out in the Children's Act No 38 of 2005² and aims at standardising the process for ECD registration across the country. A tiered registration approach will enable the registration of ECD services especially in poor, often rural areas, that were previously not able to register owing to various barriers. The purpose of this categorisation is to use the data collected to significantly increase ECD programme registration rates and to assist those centres that are conditionally registered to move to full registration. Only successfully registered centres can be properly supported with DBE subsidy budgetary guidance to create safe ECD centres and quality ECD programmes.

An ECD centre not registered with the Department is operating unlawfully and might be putting children at risk. Registering ECD centres is vital to ensure the safety of every child. Only a safe environment allows for effective ECD programmes. It is equally vital for the widely under-funded ECD sector that centres are registered and all children qualifying for the subsidy are included in the Treasury's annual ECD subsidy budget. Ultimately, it can only be Government support to ECD centres that ensures sustainability and child protection on a large scale.

Initially identifying, locating and profiling all ECD centres from the 2021 ECD Census in three KwaZulu-Natal local municipalities over five months from May 2022, we found that 160 of 345 ECD centres we visited were unregistered. Practitioners from both registered and unregistered centres were invited to

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visit our monthly helpdesk services in central satellite offices in all three local municipalities. Handing out Vangasali application packs in isiZulu with the associated registration toolkits and methods creates a developmental pathway for registration with templates provided for all necessary documents. During their helpdesk visits, ECD practitioners are taken through the Vangasali ECD Registration Pack and orientated on the A-Z of running an effective ECD programme. The process from the first visit requires five to eight follow-up visits, depending on the state of the ECD site and the level of capability of the ECD practitioner. To date, we have assisted 23 centres with basic infrastructure upgrades, mainly fencing and toilets, allowing them to submit the full Vangasali partial care application pack. Forty-two (42) of the unregistered centres we profiled have submitted their complete applications to go into a “registration track”. Thereafter, the sites are assessed for registration by SSPs (social service professionals) and EHPs (environmental health practitioners), and if they meet the requirements of the Bronze/ Silver level, they can get conditional registration.

Working closely with the local government departments, we track all applications submitted and assist with arranging the required site visits. Such close collaboration with the district DBE offices has proven beneficial to ensure applications are attended to and site visits are conducted timeously.

The call to action is for the ECD sector to provide a far more hands-on and progressive approach to registration assistance to ensure a greater number of centres, particularly in rural areas, gain full registration status.

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KEYWORDS: ECD registration, Vangasali Campaign, ECD subsidy, local municipality, Department of Basic Education

Sonja Giese (Executive Director) & Andrew Dawes – DataDrive2030

**Using data collection tools and systems to drive change in early learning in South Africa:
A case study**

In this case study, we outline the development and evolution of a suite of early learning assessment tools designed to address a measurement gap in South Africa, for locally standardised instruments suitable for assessing the development of pre-school-age children across a variety of socio-economic and linguistic contexts. The Early Learning Outcome Measures (ELOM) are aligned to the South African curricula requirements, assessing a range of developmental outcomes in young children, and providing an indication of the quality of the early learning environment in home and programme settings. The data collection tools are digitised and embedded within an end-to-end data value chain enabling users with varying levels of research expertise to collect and use data to drive change.

ELOM data quantify the striking socio-economic gradient in early childhood development in South Africa, demonstrate the relationship between physical stunting, socio-emotional functioning and learning outcomes, and provide evidence of the positive impact of high-quality early learning programmes on pre-school child outcomes. To promote secondary analyses, data from multiple studies are regularly collated into a meta dataset which is made open access via an online data portal.

We describe the services and support that make up the ELOM data value chain, noting several key challenges and enablers of data driven change within a resource constrained context. These include: deep technical expertise within a multidisciplinary and collaborative team, patient and flexible capital from mission-aligned investors, a fit-for-purpose institutional home, the appropriate use of technology, a user-centred approach to development and testing, sensitivity to children's diverse linguistic and socio-economic circumstances and to requirements for scale, appropriate training and support for a non-professional assessor base, and a commitment to ongoing learning and continuous enhancement.

Practical examples are provided of ways in which the ELOM tools and data are used for programme monitoring and enhancement purposes, to evaluate the relative effectiveness of early learning interventions, to motivate for greater budget and inform more effective resource allocation, to support the development of enabling Government systems and to track progress towards the attainment of national and global development goals.

KEYWORDS: data systems, data tools, early learning outcomes measure, ELOM, data-driven decisions

Karen Ross (Project Manager) – Mikhulu Trust

Community Health Workers supporting mothers in the First Thousand Days through parental support and book-sharing

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are healthcare providers who live in the communities in which they operate. Falling under the Western Cape Department of Health (WCDOH) and local contracted non-profit organisations (NPOs), they work closely to support services offered by clinics and hospitals in their service areas. They play a valuable role in our health system as last-mile lay-health workers. CHWs are trained to respond to the basic health needs of the community, providing essential support to families in their homes.

The WCDOH dedicates a cadre of their CHWs to provide support to all pregnant women who present at public health facilities for the First Thousand Days period. CHWs conduct regular home visits with pregnant women and mothers with young babies under age two, supporting them with different interventions related to health, development and well-being, e.g., support for breastfeeding and immunisations, among many others.

The Mikhulu Trust is playing a key role in enriching the WCDOH's First 1000 Days programme. Through training and mentorship with Mikhulu Trust, CHWs now also provide parental support to mothers by helping mothers understand the critical role they play in their baby's lives. CHWs support mothers to develop positive parent-child relationships and help them to engage their children in vital early stimulation activities, from as young as 10 months old, through book-sharing. Mikhulu Trust and the WCDOH also provide wordless picture books for each mother being visited by the CHWs.

Because CHWs typically come from the communities they serve, this also makes the programme more effective – mothers are being shown how to share books by someone who understands their realities and their communities. We have trained ~650 CHWs across mainly rural districts in the Western Cape, and we will train a further 600 in the coming months. We are also initiating a study to more rigorously assess the impact on CHWs and mothers.

By working with the Department of Health, this programme is playing a vital role in bridging the gap of “universal early childhood development (ECD) support”, as it reaches all mothers and all children. Further, it helps mothers provide ECD support early on and fills the gap in children's earliest years, where the majority of children only start attending ECD centres from ages four to five years.

KEYWORDS: first 1000 days, book-sharing, caregivers, ECD, Community Health Workers

Yusrah Ehrenreich (Advocacy and Social Justice Manager) – Centre for Early Childhood Development

Breaking Barriers: A Call for Change in Local Governments' Regulatory Frameworks for ECD Centres, starting with the City of Cape Town

The ECD Census 2021 reveals a concerning situation in the City of Cape Town, where out of 2,620 early childhood development (ECD) centres, a significant 58% (1,525 centres) are not registered as partial care facilities, as mandated by the Children's Act. An additional 5% are only conditionally registered which does not necessitate compliance with requirements like land use or approved building plans.

This alarming scenario affects nearly 58,000 young children attending these unregistered facilities that are at risk of non-compliance with both national and municipal laws. An estimated 5,100 more children attend conditionally registered centres, potentially still not conforming to the City's by-laws.

As a starting point to rectify this situation, ECD centres must obtain land use or zoning certificates and approved building plans from local government, both of which involve intricate, lengthy and costly municipal processes. These obstacles obstruct ECD centres from achieving legal registration and ultimately accessing ECD subsidies. ECD subsidies are paramount as it plays a pivotal role in improving access to quality ECD services, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) has been engaging extensively with the Executive Mayor of Cape Town and his team to address these challenges and create a more inclusive regulatory environment for ECD centres in both formal and informal areas within the City of Cape Town. In addition to regular meetings, CECD staff members have been actively involved in specific workstreams in collaboration with the City of Cape Town as part of the Mayor's ECD task team.

This presentation will discuss some of the work that has been achieved and/or is ongoing with the City of Cape Town, by identifying the regulatory/financial barriers faced by ECD centres and elaborating on proposed solutions. This collaborative effort reflects a concerted commitment to improving the regulatory environment for ECD centres in Cape Town.

As a longer-term objective of creating a more enabling and inclusive regulatory environment for ECD services across South Africa, we will expand our work on removing ECD centre registration barriers to other municipalities (beyond the City of Cape Town) and in other provinces (beyond the Western Cape).

This is a call for action: by collaborating with local government officials and working on multiple fronts, progress can be made to simplify processes, improve policies, and ensure that ECD centres across South Africa can operate more efficiently while meeting all necessary legal and safety standards.

KEYWORDS: advocacy, local government, ECD centres, registration barriers, regulatory framework

Linda Bosman (Lecturer) & Lynn Chambers – Stellenbosch University

Towards reconstructing student-teacher beliefs about children through theoretical and practical encounters in Grade R

Pre-service Grade R teachers (PST) often enter training programmes with internalised stereotypical beliefs about children following the deficit view of childhood. A deficit view focuses primarily on the perceived weaknesses and limitations of children (e.g., “passivity”) and sees the teacher’s role as being one of addressing these deficiencies. Such beliefs often contradict professional training that promotes rights and strengths-based views on childhood which focus on the child’s right to fully participate in an environment in which their unique strengths and capabilities can be identified, celebrated and promoted.

PSTs’ beliefs play a crucial role in their engagement with the content throughout the training programme, and if left unaddressed, these beliefs can impede the construction of child perspectives that are crucial for implementing participatory child-centred pedagogies in early childhood education (ECE) practice.

This presentation discusses a practice implemented by two lecturers in a Bachelor of Education (BEd) Foundation Phase programme. The practice consists of two corequisite modules: Grade R Theory and Practice (weekly lectures on campus) and Practical Learning (weekly visits to Grade R classrooms). The co-designed practicum programme aims to connect PSTs’ beliefs, knowledge, and practice by developing in them the ability to reflect on their personal beliefs and attitudes towards children and their education; conduct systematic observations of children’s behaviours and interactions using a “pedagogy of listening” approach; and document and analyse these observations, focusing on identifying and highlighting children’s strengths. This process provides PSTs with deeper insights into children and Grade R practices and prompts them to examine how their perceptions of children influence their pedagogical decisions.

This immersion into a combination of theoretical and practical learning experiences is designed to enable PSTs to move beyond their stereotypical beliefs by employing pedagogical techniques focused on listening to children and recognising the strength and agency of children through this process. This could lead to deeper reflections as PSTs’ beliefs are challenged, and changes in pedagogical practices.

To achieve this aim, PSTs were required to write an opening statement at the beginning of the year, describing their teaching philosophy and beliefs about early childhood education. They then conducted a series of school visits, returning to a Grade R classroom multiple times over a period of six weeks. During these visits, they observed children’s interactions with their environment and with each other, conducted systematic observations related to the holistic development of the child, and designed and facilitated lessons based on socio-constructivist principles. PSTs were required to submit a portfolio as evidence of this experience. This was followed by an eight-week teaching practicum, the submission of another portfolio, and, finally, a closing reflection in which PSTs needed to refer to their opening statement and describe how and why their teaching philosophy and ideas about ECE had changed.

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Reflecting on the two modules, many PSTs have responded positively with evidence of changed perspectives resulting from their engagement with rights and strengths-based views on childhood, together with their classroom observations and other practicum experiences through the year. A common reflection is that the experience of listening to children, rather than simply working through a curriculum with them, changed their perceptions and helped them realise that children indeed have “one hundred languages”, i.e., many ways of learning and expressing their uniqueness in their environment. This new awareness of the importance of eliciting the voice and participation of children in a classroom could influence how they will teach – leading to a move away from worksheets and “teacher-talk” and towards a more participatory pedagogy. However, they also face obstacles, as contemporary rights and strengths-based perspectives of children are less commonly practiced in South African contexts. This challenge makes it difficult for PSTs to implement innovative practices within traditional settings.

Teacher training institutions must recognise the influence and complexity of beliefs about children and childhood in PSTs’ professional development. Programmes should provide opportunities, such as those described above, for PSTs to examine and reconstruct their conceptions of childhood throughout the course. By supporting PSTs to reconfigure their perceptions about childhood and promoting transformative pedagogies, these programmes can contribute to the advancement of quality ECE practices in South Africa.

KEYWORDS: Grade R, pre-service teacher beliefs, contemporary strengths and rights-based child images, beliefs-theory-practice reflection

Hasina Banu Ebrahim (ECD Research Professor) – University of South Africa

Quality assurance in ECD in South Africa

The aim of this paper is to engage with the lived experiences of quality assurance (QA) in early childhood development (ECD) in South Africa (SA). The literature shows that quality is difficult to define and dependent on stakeholders, cultures and socio-economic conditions. Equally of concern are technical measures of excellence and what it means to be accountable in different ECD contexts. The study reported in this paper, used a phenomenological lens to make sense of lived realities of QA in ECD. A qualitative approach was used to produce data with 15 local ECD stakeholders in online interviews. The stakeholders were made up of two directors of non-profit organisations (NPOs) and chairs of ECD networks, one NPO director, one former policy maker, one ECD researcher active in NPOs. There were 10 practitioner/managers. The data was analysed using content analysis of preidentified themes. The study gained ethical approval at the University of South Africa (UNISA) as part of a project on workforce sustainability. It was funded by the Association for Development of Education in Africa and ECD Measure. The findings show that the building of a QA system for ECD in SA had some enabling starting points, namely, policies and emerging efforts to improve ECD services. However, there were many challenges. These were noted as a lack of shared understandings, top-down expectations that had disabling registration processes, dysfunctional municipalities, lack of training for QA and inappropriate curriculum implementation. These findings are important in light of SA heading towards implementing a new service delivery model and a more streamlined QA support system. Any choices for a QA system must take into account bridging the gap between the policy goals and realities on the ground. Assurance of quality needs to be relative to conditions under which ECD programmes are delivered in different contexts and modalities. Given the multi-layeredness of ECD, the sector requires capacity building at all levels, dedicated resources, intersectoral collaborations, partnerships, building on existing good practices and enabling innovations.

KEYWORDS: quality assurance, lived experiences, ECD policy, South Africa, ECD systems

Asanda Mpahla (Early Literacy Specialist) – Wordworks

Bringing a Wordworks online self-study training course to ECD practitioners: A snapshot of pilot learnings

Wordworks' Little Stars programme for supporting early language and literacy teaching in pre-Grade R classrooms is under increasingly high demand within its network of government and non-governmental organisation (NGO) early childhood development (ECD) partners, and we hope to extend its usefulness to ECD practitioners that fall outside of support systems.

In response to Covid-19 contact restrictions and the general movement to online training modalities, Wordworks has been able to facilitate greater access to and take-up of the Little Stars programme through its facilitated online training of trainers offering. Practitioner training time and models vary depending on context, but a course generally provides up to 30 hours of resource-based training over a year of classroom implementation. While this is our recommended training model, it is clear that not all ECD practitioners have access to NGO or Departmental professional development opportunities, nor do they have reliable access to electricity and data in order to attend synchronous online courses, and might be more likely to complete a mobile-compatible asynchronous online training course in their own time.

In 2022, Wordworks developed and initiated a pilot of a self-study online pre-Grade R practitioner course through Moodle. Over the last 18 months, we have seen three different cohorts work through the course, each receiving a different dosage of onboarding, in-person training and support. Free online courses often have low engagement and completion rates (Jordan, K. 2015), thus, our pilot was aimed at learning how the practitioners engaged with the course, how much support they required, as well as their confidence with implementing Little Stars.

In this presentation, we will share our learnings from the three cohorts and our progress towards the goal of providing ECD practitioners independent professional development opportunities and ECD trainers a blended training methodology package, combining printed learning and teaching materials, online training and in-person mediation and support.

KEYWORDS: pre-Grade R, Moodle, blended training methodology, early language and literacy teaching, teacher development

Lauren van Niekerk (Lecturer) – University of Cape Town

Understanding father's involvement in their children's early learning and development: Perceptions of South African fathers and mothers of young children

An engaged father has been shown to be a critical component of a child's positive holistic development. Despite this advance in knowledge, very little is known about father involvement in South Africa, except that two-thirds of South African children do not live with their biological father. Generally, male engagement studies in South Africa focus on this father absenteeism and its negative consequences, and so little is known about fathers who choose to be involved, often in the face of huge social and economic obstacles. Further, father involvement has been almost exclusively explored by considering only maternal reports, which often underestimate involvement. This study aims to close this gap by exploring how contemporary South African fathers, from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, understand and describe their identity and role as a father, and by understanding the type and extent of their engagement with their children, as well as the barriers and facilitators to this engagement. In addition, it aims to explore how maternal and paternal views of father involvement articulate. A mixed methods approach, using an explanatory sequential design, is being used: quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire, and qualitative data will be collected through focus group discussions. Fathers' and mothers' perceptions of involvement are being explored and compared to gain a comprehensive, holistic understanding of father involvement within a South African context. The study is underpinned by two theoretical models which informed and provided a lens through which to examine this study data, namely Lamb's Model of Father Involvement (Lamb et al., 1987) and Belsky's Process Model (1984). Preliminary quantitative results indicate that contemporary fathers perceive their paternal role as important to their child's development, have greater egalitarian beliefs about gender roles and childcare as compared to previous generations, and are thus more intentional in their engagement with their children. However, this study also argues that society has had a slower progression than fathers to ensuring equal parenting and support to fathers, specifically in terms of public policy, social structures, and attitudes. Further findings will be significant, not only in exploring the roles of present (as opposed to absent) fathers, but also how these are perceived by mothers and fathers. This study will highlight various context-specific determinants of father involvement in South Africa, such as the necessary obligations and responsibilities of fathers, parental alliance, circumstantial sources of stress, as well as social and structural factors that influence the nature of fathers' care and practical involvement. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee, Department of Social Work and Social Development, University of Cape Town.

KEYWORDS: father involvement, father engagement, early childhood development, positive parenting, present fathers

Hanrie Bezuidenhout (Postdoctoral Research Fellow) – University of Johannesburg

Improving South African Grade R children's participation and transforming a teacher's pedagogical approach through robotics dialogue storybooks

Engaging children in a dialogue while storybooks are read to them increases their vocabulary and concept development. This presentation will demonstrate how three dialogue reading books, Robot Dilemmas, were used over a period of six months to introduce and expand vocabulary and concepts about robotics of 25 Grade R children and their teacher in an Afrikaans public school in Gauteng. Globally and in South Africa, robotics is included in school curricula. Yet, teachers have limited access to effective teaching materials and pedagogical practices. In a design-based case study, dialogue storybooks were utilised to introduce the design process, concepts and vocabulary related to robotics (e.g., customise, modify and deploy) and applications of robotics (e.g., self-driving cars, recycling and navigation systems). The aim of the study was to describe the interplay between children's engagement and a teacher's pedagogy during the implementation of robotics dialogue reading in a Grade R class. Schulman's theory (1986) of pedagogical content knowledge was used to describe and evaluate the teachers' pedagogical approach of 'robotics'. Vygotsky's theory (1986) of the alignment of young children's pre-intellectual words and pre-linguistic concepts was used to describe the progress of children's engagement and concept development. The teacher demonstrated increased use of robotics discourse, and her pedagogical approach shifted from teaching 'creativity' and 'design' as the completion of a few pre-designed steps to purposefully teaching design principles, expanding children's vocabulary and developing their curiosity, imagination and transversal skills (e.g., innovation, empathy, creative and design thinking). Children's engagement and robotics vocabulary increased, and their newly-learned words and ideas were also included in their free play. Ethical considerations included parent-, school-, department- and university consent and video and audio recordings of children. The findings highlight foundational skills and knowledge needed for robotics and suggest that dialogue reading books can effectively be implemented in early childhood development to teach vocabulary and concepts. The materials will be made available online for in-service and pre-service teachers. The research can be expanded to a larger sample and in higher grades. In terms of policy, the pedagogical approach and materials can be included in the developing robotics curriculum for South Africa's foundation phase.

KEYWORDS: robotics, dialogue storybooks, teaching materials, design-based case study

Giulietta Harrison (H.O.D. Foundation Phase) – SANTS Private Higher Education Institution

Malungeni: From baseline to change – Promoting quality ECD in practice

This paper presents a baseline study conducted in 2022 in Malungeni, conducted for a project that is providing teacher training to 22 participants across five schools working in a rural context, with multiple challenges. A follow-up report will take place in late 2023 to assess the participants' shift in thinking and practice. Action research was deployed in order to be context responsive. A survey together with site visits, and interviews with teachers, as well as consensual photography were used to gather relevant data.

Challenges were identified at a number of levels. These included: infrastructure, lack of electricity, internet, problematic roads, lack of understanding of a play-based approach to teaching and learning, lack of understanding of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), and lack of resources. It was noted that not all schools had the same challenges, with some schools being relatively well equipped. It was found that many of the challenges can be addressed with active demonstration of quality early childhood development (ECD) programming in practice and the reigniting of ECD forums to support work on the ground. This was further confirmed with the Africa A+ approach that trains facilitators in communities of practice to continue to mentor teachers, outside of training periods. The project's field trips, to date, have yielded positive results through adopting a practical 'loose parts' approach related to teacher training and practice. It should further be noted that the Malungeni community is supportive of the work being done and actively engaged in striving for quality ECD.

KEYWORDS: quality ECD, National Curriculum Framework, loose parts, practical demonstration

Joanne Peers (Head of Academics), Dr Theresa Giorza & Carole Scott – Centre for Creative Education

Ocean kraals: Re-surfacing discarded stories and materials for sustainable futures

The aim of this piece of research is to invite participants to think with the concept of 'place' and discarded objects to enact story-based pedagogies for sustainable futures. South Africa is haunted. Disorderly ghostly matters surface, sink and drift in the ocean and shorelines. The sites of Camissa, ||khamis sa, translated as 'place of sweet waters', in the Western Cape, carry the history of colonisation and Apartheid, characterised by segregation and exclusions (Camissa Museum, 2022). Early childhood higher education shores carry the debris of Apartheid's education segregation laws and are polluted with effects of climate change which continues to affect the majority of pre-service early childhood teachers in South Africa (Bantu Education Act, 1953). Pre-service teachers is the term used for teachers in training or students who are studying to become qualified teachers. These erasures are embedded in single and simplified knowledges, stories and resources in teacher higher education classrooms. An urgent re-storying is needed in order to unravel colonial practices of education and resurface indigenous knowledges, stories and relations (McKittrick, 2006; Nxumalo, 2020). This presentation draws on a research project and publication which churns up new and discarded stories buried in the depths of Camissa's ocean kraals by answering the question: How can environmental storytelling make the invisible erasures visible and furthermore produce new histories in classrooms? Similarly, how can discarded materials become agents of action in climate change education? Ocean kraals are ocean baskets designed as fishing sites and are scattered all along the south coast of South Africa, utilised in pre-colonial times for sustainable fishing purposes. The researchers invite 24 pre-service early childhood teachers to gather stories in the ocean kraal, a place of care and custodianship (Tuck and Ree, 2013). Through a community of enquiry which includes dialogue, colour, drawing and discarded materials, this research activity offers alternatives in the transformation of education systems for sustainable futures. The presenters engage with early years education curriculum, pre-service early childhood teachers and storytelling and the findings complexify education practices in classrooms. This presentation articulates colour, storytelling and discarded materials as a call to action with pre-service early childhood teachers for on-going experimentation with place, relations, matter and meaning.

KEYWORDS: early childhood, environmental education, early childhood teachers, sustainable futures, storytelling

Mellony Graven (SA Numeracy Chair), Hamsa Venkat & Pamela Vale – Rhodes University

Analysing the growth of early grade mathematics research in South Africa

South African mathematics educators and researchers are increasingly acknowledging the importance of addressing challenges of mathematics teaching and learning in the early grades (Grades R-3) to avoid ever widening learning gaps between wealthier and poorer learners as children progress through schooling. In this presentation, we share the findings of two research studies in which the four of us as researchers conducted two distinct literature reviews to analyse the growth of South African Early Grade Mathematics research over the past two decades (2003-2022). The findings of these studies will appear in an upcoming Special Issue of AJRMSTE on Early Grade Mathematics (EGM) in Southern Africa. The first study reviewed articles published in leading international mathematics education journals and in accredited South African Education journals. The second study focused on peer-reviewed long paper proceedings of the Southern African Research Association of Mathematics Science and Technology Education. Both reviews point to similar trends in the growth of EGM research and publications over the past two decades. We begin by sharing the data we found in terms of growth in numbers, shifts in where research is published and the spread of contributing institutions. Of interest, our research highlights the key role played by SARAECE's establishment of the South African Journal of Early Childhood Education as a key enabler of growth over the past decade – this journal has published almost 40% of all South African Early Grade Mathematics journal articles. We then share the key themes that emerged from these two analyses in terms of the foci of research – pointing to both presences and absences. Finally, we look to some of the funding enablers that have supported the growth of this field particularly over the past decade, and argue for possibilities for expanding the regional and institutional contributions to the field. We highlight the way in which research funding is required in order to sustain the growth of the field of EGM in South Africa and to expand the institutional representation in the field.

KEYWORDS: Early Grade Mathematics research, literature review, systematic review, growth South African ECD mathematics research, journal articles

Nkhensani Susan Thuketana (Lecturer) – University of Pretoria

Developing student's and early childhood development practitioners' awareness of sensory gardens benefits

Literature sheds evidence of sensory gardens as an effective learner support and stimulation strategy for learners with learning difficulties and engages all five senses. According to the Progress in Reading and Literacy and the Trends in Mathematics and Science Studies, South African learners are underperforming in reading comprehension, Mathematics and Science subjects. The research traces the challenge back to Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners' lack of capacity to identify the learning difficulties' causes and to apply early intervention strategies for learning success. In interacting with concepts of a sensory garden, learners can improve memory and confidence, reduce stress, and enhance interpersonal relationships to encourage learning.

This paper reports on a mutual benefit service learning project to equip 20 purposefully selected students registered for a learner support module and five ECD practitioners in collaboration with the Mamelodi campus project to use sensory gardens to stimulate school readiness in young learners. The project used Kolbs' experiential learning theory's reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation stages for the participants to co-construct sensory garden experiences. The project, which took six months to complete, commenced after ethical approval by the university's research committee. The ethical considerations included participants giving consent before participation, confidentiality, and permission to withdraw without penalty during the project.

The narrative qualitative, multiple-case design project used semi-structured interviews within an interpretive paradigm to glean into practitioners' understanding of the sensory garden benefit and training needs. The thematically analysed and descriptively presented data revealed participating students acquired skills to assess learners' needs to benefit from sensory gardens intervention. ECD practitioners expressed the need for a better conceptualisation of sensory garden and their benefits. The project recommends using research-based and context-relevant sensory garden intervention strategies to enhance learning, development, school readiness, and curriculum access as a call to action in the South African Education system.

KEYWORDS: childhood development, experiential learning theory, learning success, sensory garden, service learning

Mmatsetshweu Ruby Motaung (Director) – Training & Resources in Early Education

Sivulithuba: Creating opportunities for capacity building and access support in the early years

The Sivulithuba project is a community engagement research project that materialised through a partnership between two KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) early childhood non-governmental organisations (NGOs), namely TREE (Training and Resources in Early Education) and Midlands Community College in 2020. The ECD workforce and their inclusion in the ranks of educators is now recognised as a vital aspect in driving the professionalisation of the early childhood development (ECD) sector, enhancing the quality of education and the delivery of universal access of the Essential Package of ECD Services for all South Africa's children. Chapter 10 in the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) of 2015 clearly provides for the responsibility of human resource development. Section 10.1 of the NIECDP states "the objective is to develop appropriate cadres of early childhood development practitioners, in sufficient numbers and sufficient skills to support the implementation of the national integrated early childhood development policy and programme". The main purpose of the five-year project is to enable access, build capacity and transform student support for Level 4 practitioners before they enter higher education. This project is informed by the work of Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care & Education (PIECCE) and the urgent need to develop the ECD workforce. The project seeks to advance transformative learning with its substantive focus on competency building including digital learning for a blended response to professional development and well-planned transitions to the digital learning environment. Action Learning Research through the lens of the Transformative Learning Theories will be used throughout the project. Data will be collected through interviews, questionnaires, observations to inform our situation analysis, collaboration and reflection over the various phases of implementation. Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA) College of Education's Ethics Review Committee (Ethics Reference #: 2020/05/13/90237323/29/AM). The presentation discusses two parts of the pre-university programme. The curriculum design shows the shift from an academic skills focus to developmental education. Implications for practice or policy with regard to 'transforming teacher education in the early years'. The two levers for change – capacity building prior to university admission and developmental education – are viewed as entry points for equity of opportunities and for equity of outcomes to professionalise ECD.

KEYWORDS: access, bridging, learning pathways, professionalisation, opportunities

Daniel Peter Al-Naddaf (Candidate Attorney) – Equal Education Law Centre

Chapter 7 of the Children’s Act: What are the best interests of young children?

The safeguarding and protection of young children require a survivor-centred approach within the ‘best interests of the child’ standard. While the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 enshrines the latter standard in its general principles, there remains scope for examining the Act’s incorporation of either standard in Chapter 7, which is South Africa’s primary legislation on child safeguarding. I begin by drawing on child-centred research on legislation, such as the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 and the Child Justice Act 75 of 2008, and on prevention and response effectiveness for child survivors of violence, abuse and neglect. A particularly significant publication is M Reyneke, ‘Realising the Child’s Best Interests: Lessons from the Child Justice Act to Improve the South African Schools Act’ PER/PELJ 2016(19).

Using this research, I argue that a child- and survivor-centred approach which meets the best interests of young children should emphasise prevention and recognise the risk inherent in caring for young children. I then assess Chapter 7 of the Children’s Act against this standard, through a doctrinal review of the Act against its general principles, an application of literature on the capacity of young children to express needs, and a thematic analysis of proceedings at the Children’s Court of South Africa. I do not engage directly with any persons in my research and refer only to publicly available Children’s Court cases. Following this assessment, I make three key findings. Firstly, Chapter 7 unreasonably positions the State only as a protector of children who experience harm by non-State actors, without recognising the capacity of State entities to perpetrate harm. Secondly, Chapter 7 disproportionately emphasises responses to harm, rather than recognising and mandating effective prevention processes. Thirdly, these deficiencies especially undermine the safeguarding of young children, who are even more constrained in their capacity to express needs, access support, and identify safe adults for sensitive disclosures.

The implications of this study call for stakeholders in the Early Childhood Education sector to urge amendments to the Children’s Act, which emphasise prevention and acknowledge inherent risk, in order to centre and protect young children in primary legislation.

KEYWORDS: safeguarding, survivor-centred, best interests, State, Children’s Act

Mellony Graven (SA Numeracy Chair) & Hamsa Venkat – Rhodes University

The importance of mental mathematics for supporting Foundation Phase teaching and learning

In this presentation, we argue for the importance of mental mathematics in primary early grade teaching and learning for number sense in South Africa and beyond. Increasing awareness of this importance and growing research linked to local intervention projects provided the motivation for our recommendation of an upcoming Special Collection on the topic titled: Mental Mathematics for Number Sense in the Early Grades. The Special Collection builds on local research findings that point to a preference for algorithmic or unit-based counting strategies over often more efficient mental mathematics strategies (Graven et al., 2013). We then share two linked research-informed interventions that have emerged from our joint work as South African Numeracy Chairs. Both have received institutional ethical clearance. The first, running in schools is the Mental Starters Assessment Programme (MSAP) that builds on a broadly constructivist perspective of mathematics learning. Work on this project began in 2016 and following small-scale piloting (with all ethical permissions granted) was followed by a national feasibility study implemented in Grade 3 Mathematics classrooms by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (resources are available on the DBE platform). The second, running in the higher education sector is the Mental Mathematics Work in Learning Project (MM-WIL). This builds on the MSAP and its resources and is implemented by teacher educators in pre-service primary teacher courses across a range of partner universities and institutions. Many of these teacher educators are involved in researching the use of MSAP in pre-service teacher education. Each of these teacher educators also apply for ethical clearance in their institutions. Finally, we share insights from these interventions for taking the field forward in South Africa and beyond. In particular, we note that there is much to be gained in simultaneously addressing pre-service teacher education needs along with learner interventions – as it is teachers who implement interventions. Across both interventions, the focus on ‘mental mathematics’ supports bringing attention to the need for developing number sense because standard algorithms are not well suited to mental mathematics. Furthermore, developing mental representations, such as the empty number line and the part-part-whole model provide support for developing understanding of key mental mathematics strategies. While mental mathematics is listed within the primary mathematics curriculum it is seldom given the attention it deserves. This implies that policy needs to foreground the opportunities that the inclusion of mental mathematics brings to the early grade mathematics classroom and provide in-service and pre-service teacher development to support the teaching of it.

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sense: Exploring the need for mental mathematical skills assessment within the Annual National Assessments. SAJCE, 3(2), 131-143.

KEYWORDS: mental starters, number sense, fluency, mental strategies, Foundation Phase mathematics
does

Dr Shelley O'Carroll (Early Literacy Specialist) – Independent

Exploring the impact of a story-based pre-Grade R teacher training programme

South Africa's reading crisis has led to growing recognition of the need to invest in improving the quality of teaching in the years before formal schooling begins. Children's reading trajectories are shaped in their early years and there is a need for evidence-based early childhood teacher development programmes that strengthen teacher-child interaction and support quality language teaching.

The Little Stars programme is an affordable language and literacy professional development programme for pre-Grade R teachers that was designed for low-resource contexts. We report on a study that explored the impact of this story-based teacher training programme on 1.) teaching practices and interaction in the classroom and 2.) children's early literacy and language skills. The study was funded by the British Academy with ethical approval from Stellenbosch University.

Early childhood development (ECD) centres were recruited with the support of ECD forums and NGOs in Paarl, Wellington and Khayelitsha. Teachers were randomly assigned to two groups: the teachers in the intervention group attended monthly training workshops from February to August 2022 and the teachers in the control group received training from August to December 2022. Workshops were conducted in isiXhosa or Afrikaans, and teachers were provided with home language Teacher Guides and resources. The final sample included 51 ECD teachers and 246 children. Classroom observations and child assessments were conducted in February and August. Child outcome measures included Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) and supplementary language tests.

A randomised pre- and post-test, between-subject and within-subject design was used, where participants in the intervention group were compared with themselves over time to measure progress. The intervention group was also compared to a control group that received normal classroom teaching.

We highlight some key findings: high levels of attendance and programme fidelity as well as a significant improvement for intervention group teachers on subscales of an observation tool. Analysis of child outcomes showed a significant main effect of time for most measures and significant improvements for intervention groups on selected measures. The study contributes to evidence about the impact of early interventions and demonstrates that affordable, high-quality professional development programmes have the potential to influence teaching practice and strengthen early language and literacy development.

KEYWORDS: language, early literacy, teacher development, pre-Grade R, programme impact

Nomasomi Matiso (Lecturer) – Walter Sisulu University

Early childhood development practitioners' competence in developing learners' literacy skills

The purpose of this paper was to investigate whether Early Childhood Development practitioners deliver self-sustaining literacy skills to learners in their classrooms. Literacy skills, including, phonics and phonemic awareness, serve as a fundamental aspect of quality education. Phonological awareness is also essential for the development of reading and writing skills in early childhood. Literacy skills in early childhood are essential skills for all children to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet basic learning needs. This paper is grounded on Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural theory, which advocates that cognitive development results from social interactions. The development of literacy skills provides learners with the competence, confidence and motivation necessary for them to be able to read and write at an early stage. Entrenched in an interpretive paradigm, this study employed a qualitative approach, and a case study design. Face to face semi-structured interviews, and observations were conducted to provide in-depth perspectives about Early Childhood practitioners' knowledge and competence about literacy development in early childhood. Data were collected from six conveniently selected schools that have Early Childhood practitioners. Ethical considerations were taken into account during this process and this includes obtaining informed consent from all participants. Findings revealed that practitioners are not competent in the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness to children in Grade R. Children proceed to the next grades without having reached the expected level of proficiency of reading and knowledge of phonics, therefore resulting in a recurrence of language difficulties as they progress in their schooling career. Inability to read contributes to high illiteracy and dropout rates that negatively impact on quality education. The researcher recommends that Early Childhood Development practitioners be extensively trained to teach phonics, phonemic awareness and early writing conventions. The author also recommends the improvement of literacy programmes and training of Early Childhood Development practitioners as these will also promote phonemic awareness.

KEYWORDS: literacy, competence, quality programmes, phonics, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness

Donna Hannaway (Senior Lecturer) – University of South Africa

Enhancing early childhood education? Exploring the intersection of teacher education and digital learning

The purpose of this study was to explore how teacher educators perceive the role of technology in enhancing teaching practices and preparing future teachers for a digital world. This presentation focuses on the viewpoints of teacher educators, providing valuable insights into their perceptions and practices related to digital learning in early childhood teacher education. It builds upon previous research on technology integration and teacher education (Abbit, 2011; Liao et al, 2017; 2021; Koehler et al, 2013). Dewey's (1998) social-constructivist theory frames this study, which acknowledges the potential for digital learning technologies to support teacher educators' active participation, knowledge co-creation, and development of early childhood teachers' critical thinking skills. Semi-structured interviews with six purposefully selected teacher educators were conducted as part of a qualitative research strategy. By using this methodology, their experiences, and practices for incorporating digital learning into teacher education were thoroughly explored. The data were subjected to thematic analysis to find recurrent themes and patterns. All participants provided their informed consent, and their identity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Data processing, privacy, and protection were adhered to.

Teacher educators recognised the potential of digital learning to enhance early childhood teacher education, with caution that artificial intelligence (AI) tools should support digital learning rather than replace student-teacher relationships. Findings emphasise involving teacher educators' insights in shaping digital learning integration strategies. Empowering educators with professional development in pedagogy, technology, and curriculum design can facilitate successful digital integration, enriching learning experiences in early childhood education. This study urges stakeholders in early childhood education to establish a supportive ecosystem for digital learning integration. Collaborative networks among teacher educators, policymakers, and tech experts should be cultivated to share best practices and resources. This collective effort can create an environment fostering seamless digital learning integration and advancing early childhood education.

KEYWORDS: digital learning, teacher education, early childhood education, digital practices, digital pedagogy

Ensa Johnson (Lecturer), Dr Mary G Clasquin-Johnson & Dr Arine Kuyler – University of South Africa

Training ECD teachers for early intervention and inclusion for children with disabilities

Since 1994, an inclusive education system was adopted for all children (irrespective of their abilities) to learn together in South African schools (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020). The White Paper 6 was formulated within a support system that addresses disability and other barriers to learning arising from poverty, inequality and other social conditions, stipulating a move away from determining education provision based on disability type to inclusive education (Department of Education 2001). According to McKenzie and Dalton (2020), the inclusive Education system in South Africa is mainly built on two pillars, namely, (i) the Guidelines to responding to learner diversity through curriculum and assessment policy statements in the Classroom (Department of Basic Education 2011), as well as the (ii) National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (Department of Basic Education 2014). Despite all these procedures and legislation in place, implementation of inclusive education in South Africa is slow. According to research, possible reasons for this include a lack of technology and capacity (including inadequate teacher education), lack of finances, and teachers' attitudes, knowledge and self-efficacy, to mention a few (Hellmich et al., 2019; Opoku et al., 2021; Walton, 2023). Teachers' professional personalities as well as their intentions concerning inclusive teaching are important conditions for successful learning environments (Hellmich et al., 2019). As such, the programme, Teaching Learners with Autism is offered by a comprehensive open distance e-learning institution in South Africa to equip teachers to teach learners with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

The aim of this paper is to report on a continuous professional development programme aimed at equipping early childhood development (ECD) teachers to address children's diverse learning needs as promoted by the Sustainable Development Goals related to quality inclusive education. Utilising the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991, 2011) which focuses on predicting and explaining behaviours over which people can exercise self-control, we illuminate ECD teachers' attitudes and behaviours to include children with disabilities. Data was generated using a mixed method convergent research design. First, a pre-training questionnaire (quantitative phase) was conducted to determine participants' knowledge, skills and attitudes on teaching learners with autism. Thereafter, focus group discussions (qualitative phase) were held with a sample of 50 teachers from the five districts in the Eastern Cape, to gain further insight into their attitudes and behaviours related to inclusion for children with autism and 18 other disabilities before the training. Inductive theoretical analysis was employed using Atlas-ti. Results from the quantitative and qualitative phases were then triangulated. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant provincial department of education as well as ethics approval from the university 2022/09/07/1130536/35/AM.

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Preliminary findings related to the participants' conceptions of children with disabilities which underpin their decision-making processes include teachers': lack of knowledge and skills of teaching learners with autism and self-efficacy; negative attitudes towards inclusion; lack of support, and lack of resources in the classroom. The results have strong implications for training ECD teachers to be intentional to transform their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (practices) to develop all children to reach their full potential in inclusive education.

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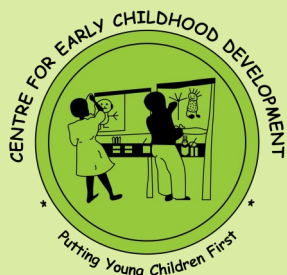
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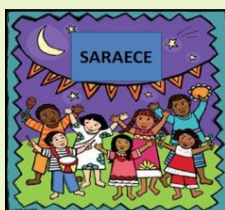
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