

School Counseling for Preparing ECD Practitioners in Addressing Children's Learning Difficulties: A Possible Solution for Job Creation

Maphetla Magdeline Machaba

Abstract

This conceptual paper explores how early childhood development practitioners are prepared for addressing children's learning difficulties through counseling, to encourage entrepreneurship. Due to the limited discourse on how ECD practitioners are provided with guidance and counseling for job creation in South Africa, the text aims to highlight how ECD practitioners' preparation for addressing learners' difficulties can help create jobs in ECD centres. Due to the historical neglect, the ECD sector is faced with numerous challenges to quality, an under skilled workforce with low pay, and poor conditions of service in the Black rural areas. If the sector is to grow and be upgraded to enable practitioners to be entrepreneurs, it will need to become more attractive as a career option. ECD practitioners have to plan, organise and conduct activities to help pre-primary school children develop a wide variety of skills that include speech, reading, writing, motor skills and social interaction. Counseling and guiding ECD practitioners for job creation is a quality that will impact positively on society, thus creative staffing should be given serious consideration. The argument in this paper is whether ECD practitioners can be adequately capacitated through counseling to acquire adequate skills to create jobs. This qualitative paper analysed literature studies that include books and articles written on performance management systems in higher education, to establish how performance data is used to improve institutional staff performance. Findings reveal that capacitating ECD practitioners through counseling provides opportunities that will make a real and lasting difference in children's and society's lives. Recommendations are that the government and educational stakeholders should ensure counseling and support is provided to ECD practitioners to enable them to create jobs for more practitioners involved in addressing children's learning difficulties.

Keywords: counseling, ECD practitioners, entrepreneurship, learning difficulties, practitioner support, practitioner preparation, job creation, teaching skills

Introduction

Early childhood development (ECD) is the phase between birth and the school-going age (pre-school), when children learn foundational cognitive abilities, attitudes, and skills, in preparation for primary schooling and the rest of their lives (RSA, 2001). The earliest years of life are pivotal for children and their societies. However, many children in developing countries are not able to develop to their full potential because of serious deficits in health, nutrition and proper training of practitioners

and the centre managers (Martinez, Naudeau & Pereira, 2012). The effects of poor practitioner preparation can be long lasting, reinforcing the intergenerational development of children and the transmission of poverty to the society. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), as well the South African government also indicate its impact on later educational achievements and the achievement of universal primary education (one of the Millennium Development Goals). Xulu (2016) states that many black learners face learning barriers and need well prepared practitioners. According to Xulu (2016), language barrier is a type of psychological barrier that affects communication, and hampers learner performance in school subjects. Children taught by well-prepared and counselled practitioners, perform better at school, have better employment opportunities later in life, and contribute more to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country, as opposed to children who do not experience a formal ECD education.

ECD practitioners create the foundation upon which all future learning will occur, and their work is both meaningful and valuable. Each society relies on practitioners to prepare our earliest learners for a lifetime of learning and discovery (Murray & Biersteker, 2014). Poor ECD practitioner preparation and experiences, and lack of counseling, can limit later cognitive development of the child, and impact negatively on the economy of the country. To address these problems, and to help create jobs, ECD practitioners' preparation should include counseling and creative ways of acquiring ECD teaching skills and addressing learning difficulties. Early childhood development practitioners are known by several names such as early childcare teacher, kindergarten teacher, nursery school teacher, and playschool teacher (Career planet, n.d.). In this paper the term ECD practitioner is used to discuss ECD practitioners tasked to perform indoor and outdoor tasks for addressing barriers to learners' experience in education. Most childhood barriers include, among others, language and numeracy. The intention, therefore, is to benefit children, families, communities, government, the ECD non-profit sector on how to provide, quality ECD practitioner preparation programmes. The South African policymakers would have to provide guidelines based on empirical evidence for the ECD programmes. Furthermore ECD practitioners will need counseling skills for addressing learning barriers at the beginning of the learner's education.

ECD centres are vital in the lives of children to equip them with foundational knowledge and skills to succeed through life. It is very essential that practitioners identify and intervene right at the beginning of the learners' careers so that the latter should have a sound foundation to build on in this regard (Van Niekerk, Ashley-Cooper & Atmore, 2017). According to the South African White Paper 6, the education and training system should promote education for all and foster the development of inclusive and supportive centres of learning that would enable all learners to participate actively in the education process so that they can develop and extend their potential and participate as equal members of society. If these principles can be realised, barriers to learning will be minimised. It is also government policy

that all learners be taught mathematics because it is a very important and necessary life skill that cannot be done without.

As policy makers consider expansion of ECD programs, they have to ensure that practitioner counseling and development optimise children's experiences while maintaining economic responsibility. In this regard, policy makers should consider setting professional development and counseling standards that are neither too low to jeopardise the value of the programs they are creating; nor unnecessarily high to be costly and make it difficult to recruit ECD practitioners (Early et al., 2006). The current paper concentrates on practitioner preparation through counseling to ensure more ECD centres and jobs are created to address learner barriers and ensure the remedy of this anomaly at an early stage.

Becoming an ECD practitioner

In July 2014, the Minister of Social Development announced the South African government's commitment to make ECD a public good and to accelerate implementation of a comprehensive ECD programme from conception to formal school going age (Murray & Biersteker, 2014). This was to focus, in particular, on children in poor communities, access for children with disabilities and those in rural and informal settlements, and include both centre and non-centre based services (Murray & Biersteker, 2014). The Department of Basic Education expanded access to ECD to disadvantaged communities, such as rural villages and poor townships, however, most parts of the country did not have enough ECD practitioners, as enrollment in ECD classes was expanding rapidly, increasing the demand for ECD practitioners. ECD practitioners are valuable to society and should have a passion for early education. They work with children at the start of their educational journey and help them to understand and attain some of the most basic and foundational academic, social, cognitive and emotional concepts. The ECD sector requires practitioners who are counselled, trained or qualified, because ECD practitioners are a scarce skill in South Africa (Kotzé, 2015).

The skills and attitudes required of practitioners are love and care for children, ability to communicate well with children – one-on-one and as a group, a positive attitude towards children and their needs, and the ability to speak to parents with care. ECD practitioners in South Africa should have a qualification, and, several qualifications can be acquired before becoming an ECD practitioner (Atmore, Van Niekerk & Ashley-Cooper, 2012). The Further Education and Training Certificate in Early Childhood Development (NQF Level 4) qualification is the entry-level qualification for ECD practitioners. It serves as the equivalent of a Grade 12, and a Grade 9 certificate is required for entry. Qualifications are: The National Diploma in Early Childhood Development (NQF Level 5); Higher Certificate in Early Childhood Development (NQF Level 5); Advanced Certificate in Education – Foundation Phase and Early Childhood Development (NQF Level 6), a qualification usually followed by people who are already qualified as educators; Bachelor of Primary Education in

Early Childhood Development (NQF Level 7); and Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Development – Foundation Phase (NQF Level 8). These qualifications can be studied at a TVET (FET) College and some South African universities. Once you've graduated, you will be required to register with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) as a practitioner/educator (Atmore, Van Niekerk & Ashley-Cooper, 2012).

Capacitating ECD practitioners

The need for quality ECD centres is also increasing because of the social changes in the labour market. Dual-income households are rapidly on the rise, with both parents having to work fulltime. In South Africa there is also a high rate of single-parent households, however all children, according to the NCSNET/NCESS report (1997), need qualified practitioners who are equipped through professional development and are prepared and supported for their role in the provision of education and support. Practitioners including classroom assistants, should be equipped and accredited through various pre- and in-service programmes, to be able to respond to learner diversity in the ECD context. There is a need for affordable, quality childcare services across the country (Le Roux, 2016), hence, in 2008, the South African government designated early childhood development as a national developmental priority (Richter et al., 2017). This meant that government programmes would focus on developing and counseling ECD practitioners to improve the quality of existing ECD centres, promote a standardised ECD curriculum, and encourage capacitated ECD practitioners to establish more ECD centres, where there is a need for them.

ECD practitioners need counseling skills and knowledge to identify the origin of the learning barrier from the learner's environment, at school or at home. These are, for example, language, socio-economic, inflexible curriculum, language and communication, attitudes, lack of access to basic services, poverty and underdevelopment, factors which place learners at risk. The trained and counselled ECD practitioners should have the necessary skills to look after and teach children. The ultimate goal is that everyone in an ECD centre in South Africa should be well developed and know what the rules and regulations to be followed are in this regard (Murray & Biersteker, 2014). Capacitated ECD practitioners can start their own ECD centres and get the chance to be their own bosses while making a living doing what they love doing. To register for an ECD centre in South Africa, the new centre owners need to consult the office nearest to the proposed Department of Social Development centre, and then the local authority (municipality), to obtain the right to use the centre after acquiring the necessary health clearance certificate for running the centre in that particular location.

ECD practitioner support

ECD practitioner support has development as priority, followed by economic empowerment. Government has many grants aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and small businesses. All day care and ECD centres have to be registered at the local Department of Social Development branch. When registering for an ECD centre, you can simultaneously apply for departmental funding or assistance from the Department of Social Development. The Small Enterprise Finance Agency also provides financial support to small-scale entrepreneurs in outer urban or rural areas. The National Empowerment Fund is a government fund that helps previously disadvantaged individuals and communities obtain financial support (Van Niekerk, Ashley-Cooper & Atmore, 2017). The National Youth Development Agency provides funds for young entrepreneurs between the ages of 18 and 35. Local government offices can be contacted to find out if there are any funding or development opportunities for starting an ECD centre in your area. If you are starting an ECD centre in a disadvantaged area, you might be able to get donations, such as food, equipment, or toys (Van Niekerk, Ashley-Cooper & Atmore, 2017). The Department of Social Development can be contacted for help securing ECD centre donations, or to find local non-governmental organisations in the province that can sponsor the centre. Practitioners may qualify for donations if their centre is a non-profit organisation, and it focuses on supplying low-income families with ECD facilities, or they work with disabled children.

Registration requires consultation at the local municipal authority to obtain the right of use and the necessary health clearance certificate to run the centre in the proposed location. The local Departments of Education and Health or the Department of Social Development may indicate any other requirements such as a weekly food menu, a daily programme, a building plan of location (if appropriate), a signed and date copy of the business's constitution, a business plan (for funding applications), and a financial report for the past year (for funding applications) for the centre or a lease contract with the owners of the building, if leasing. After receiving provisional registration, the practitioner undergoes assessment by the relevant Department to make sure the ECD centre complies with the Department's standards and registration requirements in terms of infrastructure, health and safety, education curriculum, and human resource management (Van Niekerk, Ashley-Cooper & Atmore, 2017).

Identification of learners who experience barriers to learning

Intelligence and other human capacities are not fixed at birth but, rather, are shaped to some extent by environmental influences and through practitioner teaching. Disabilities and other factors may render a child at risk for development and learning, so that the original barriers become more severe, and secondary challenges present. Early intervention programs can make a significant difference in

the developmental status of young children and can do so more rapidly than later remedial efforts after a child has entered elementary school. According to Papatheodorou (2005), a young child who has or is at risk of developing barriers, should get intervention as early as possible because the early years of the child are when the child is most susceptible and responsive to learning experiences. It is at this stage that initial patterns of learning and behaviour that influence the nature of all subsequent development are established.

Papatheodorou (2005) further purports that early identification of learning barriers provides a foundation for later learning academic success experiences for learners at risk. If learning barriers are not identified early, the learning barriers may continue and could lead to more learners dropping out of school, exhibiting behaviour barriers and developing greater academic deficiencies. ECD practitioners should be counselled to be creative in managing the learning programmes of the learners and assess the needs of the learners collectively and individually. They should provide flexible programmes that accommodate a variety of needs, drawing on the resources of the learners themselves. A key role would be facilitating a learning environment that fosters respect among learners and among the learning community as a whole.

Research methodology

This paper employed a descriptive research methodology wherein literature analysis of documents was completed based on data extracted from secondary sources of information. The paper employed a qualitative conceptual approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to address the research question: How are ECD practitioners addressing children's learning difficulties, capacitated? And how will their counseling preparation help create jobs? The paper is located within the interpretive paradigm which served as an analytical tool to highlight how ECD practitioners teaching children with learning difficulties are capacitated and counselled; and how their preparation may ensure jobs are created. The constructive approach offers global views of ECD policies ensuring practitioner preparation, followed by the provision of counseling support services, the provision of resources and developmental strategies, and parental involvement and recognition. For learners to fully participate in society, practitioners must be equipped with a variety of teaching techniques that allow learners to meet their greatest potential. In support of the above scholars, Morin and Franks (2009) state that all learners, regardless of their barriers, backgrounds, personal characteristics, physical challenges must have opportunities to learn. This can only happen if the practitioner is capacitated (Morin & Franks, 2009) and counselled. In recognition of the increasingly important role practitioners play in addressing learner barriers, there is also a need for practitioners to apply their counseling skills by training more practitioners to improve the economy of the country. A partnership should be created between the ECD centres and the community to enhance the country's economy.

Conclusion

ECD practitioners should be capacitated with knowledge of the various teaching methods, especially with regard to learners from disadvantaged communities coming to school for the first time (Morin & Franks, 2009). Some come into contact with the language of teaching for first time at school. If this problem is not attended to earlier, such children will experience learning difficulties throughout their lives. Early intervention implies some economic-social benefits in the prevention of developmental problems in young learners, may reduce more serious, burdensome barriers for society to cope with later, including accompanying costs. According to Pal (2009), disadvantaged children are more likely to perform poorly at school because of their "different home environments" (p. 8). These children are more at risk of experiencing learning difficulties because of their lack of out-of-school educational support. Therefore, poorly capacitated practitioners and lack of counseling may place these children in an untenable situation in their education, right from the beginning.

Similarly, Groark et al. (2007), found that practitioners who can identify learner barriers at an early stage, may help the learners with complex needs or particular types or patterns of difficulty in learning, succeed, in the ordinary school system. Early detection comes with good practice, creative teaching methods, an improved teaching and learning environment, that meets the learners' needs. The success of ECD practitioners and learners can be attained through practitioner planning and support of a collaborative working practice with parents. ECD practitioners have a significant role to play to ensure children develop self-esteem and gain acceptance. When the other learners in the classroom see that the practitioner accepts and loves all children, they will also accept one another. The educator as a role model and as a substitute to the parent has an important role to play in accommodating learners with barriers. The counseled practitioner should teach learners to develop empathy towards others, and coping skills in response to emotions such as anger, sadness, and anxiety. Learners should be educated in an inclusive environment where similarities and differences are celebrated.

References

- Atmore, E., van Niekerk, L. J. & Ashley-Cooper, M. (2012): Challenges facing the early childhood development sector in South Africa. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 2(1), 121-140.
- Baxter, P. & Jack, S. (2008): Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544-559.
- Department of Education (DoE) (2001): *Education White Paper 6 - Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive education and training system*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Department of Education NCSNET / NCESS (1998): *Quality Education for All. Overcoming Barriers to Learning and Development*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Early, D. M., Bryant, D. M., Pianta, R. C., Clifford, R. M., Burchinal, M. R., Ritchie, S. & Barbarin, O. (2006): Are teachers' education, major, and credentials related to classroom quality and children's academic gains in pre-kindergarten? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21(2), 174-195.

- Groark, C. J., Mehaffie, K. E., McCall, R. B. & Greenberg, M. T. (Eds.) (2007): *Evidence-Based Practices and Programs for Early Childhood Care and Education*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Kotzé, J. (2015): The readiness of the South African education system for the pre-Grade R year. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 5(2), 1-27.
- Le Roux, S. G. (2016): The role of family literacy programmes to support emergent literacy in young learners. Doctoral dissertation, Maastricht University.
- Martinez, S., Naudeau, S. & Pereira, V. (2012): *The Promise of Preschool in Africa: A Randomized Impact Evaluation of Early Childhood Development in Rural Mozambique*. World Bank & Save the Children.
- Morin, J. E. & Franks, D. J. (2009): Why do some children have difficulty learning mathematics? Looking at language for answers. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 54(2), 111-118.
- Murray, C. & Biersteker, L. (2014): *TVET Colleges: Contributions towards HR Development in the Early Childhood Development Sector*. Ilifalabantwana: Lessons from the field.
- Pal, G. C. (2009): Teaching and learning mathematics. University School Resource Network 1-12.
- Papatheodorou, T. (2005): *Behaviour Problems in the Early Years*. New York: Routledge.
- Republic of South Africa (RSA) (2001): *Education White Paper 5 - On Early Childhood Education. Meeting the Challenge of Early Childhood Development in South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Richter, L. M., Daelmans, B., Lombardi, J., Heymann, J., Boo, F. L., Behrman, J. R. & Bhutta, Z. A. (2017): Investing in the foundation of sustainable development: pathways to scale up for early childhood development. *The lancet*, 389(10064), 103-118.
- Van Niekerk, L., Ashley-Cooper, M. & Atmore, E. (2017): *Effective early childhood development programme options meeting the needs of young South African children*. Cape Town: Centre for Early Childhood Development.
- Xulu, P. T. (2016): Exploring the importance of early childhood stimulation in rural Howick West in Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. Doctoral dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Author affiliation

Dr. Maphetla Magdeline Machaba, University of South Africa, South Africa

Please cite this publication as:

Machaba, M. M. (2021): School Counseling for Preparing ECD Practitioners in Addressing Children's Learning Difficulties: A Possible Solution for Job Creation. *Comparative School Counseling*, 1, 67-74.