ADDRESSING QUALITY MATTERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE EDUCATION: A GLIMPSE OF THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN PRESCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT
Early childhood is the most critical time that lays the foundation for lifelong learning development in a child's brain. The study seeks to address the quality of early childhood care education in preschools. This is a qualitative study conducted in selected preschools on early childhood care education, reviewing issues that impact this, as reflected in literature. The study reflects findings from the interviews that were done in five (5) selected preschools with two participants in each centre. The study showed that providing high quality education that yields positive outcomes for children is at the core of policy and initiatives in the early years of learning globally. Primarily, the training, teacher qualification constitutes quality education. However, to acquire a higher quality reception of early childhood education, there is a need for support from various stakeholders such as the Department of Basic Education, Department of Social Development, ECD Training Institutions.

Keywords: Quality; early childhood care education; teachers; preschools; training; qualifications

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is viewed as both a human right and an indispensable means of realising other human rights (Otomiewo, 2011). Hence, it is interesting to note that education has been linked to the concept of human rights. UNESCO (2020) reports that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) that is truly inclusive is much more than just preparation for primary school. It can be the foundation for emotional wellbeing and learning throughout life and one of the best investments a country can make as it promotes holistic development, gender equality and social cohesion. Declared a global pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO), COVID-19 has had far-reaching impact on every facet of life around the world, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and negatively impacting vulnerable and disadvantaged populations the most. Learning continuity has been disrupted by school closure, thus generating an unprecedented situation worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for essential basic services across South Africa, seemingly, it affected the quality of ECCE. Early Childhood Development (ECD) play a central role in ensuring that children, particularly vulnerable children, can access important basic rights. That includes the rights to health, nutrition, learning, development and play, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, ECCE is considered the cornerstone for economic and social development, with early ECD as its foundation. Therefore, the future of a country is based on the level of quality education acquired by its citizens (Otomiewo, 2011) by helping to transform it from pre-literate to contemporary nationhood (Okoro, 2011). The values of adequate ECD and early intervention for later school success are currently well recognised at the international level (UNESCO, 2009), and from this perspective, all children must have equal access to ECD before formal education.

1.1. Contextualising early childhood care education in South Africa

Early childhood development in South Africa is an intersectoral responsibility, shared by the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Health (DoH) and the Department of Basic Education (DBE), with the Ministry of Women, Children and People with Disabilities playing a monitoring role (Department of Basic Education, 2014). The policy framework for a national system of ECD rests on a series of White Papers. The Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (Department of Education, 1996) established the broad framework for ECD. The White Paper on Early Childhood Development No. 5 (Department of Education, 2001a) aimed at forging integration between various government departments in ECD over five years from 2005–2010. The National Integrated Plan for ECD (NIPECD) (2005–2010) (Republic of South Africa, 2005b) is the only intersectoral policy for ECD and addresses programmes in health, nutrition, water and sanitation and early learning and psychosocial care.

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) caregivers in South Africa currently face a policy vacuum regarding the quality delivery of service and practice of ECD. Kashin (2016, 17) contended that the emphasis on including preschool children in primary schools has placed extraordinary demands on ensuring quality school readiness activities, among other things. Quality ECD programmes must produce children who are expected to be ready for grade one (Clasquin-Johnson, 2010). Lake (2011) believed that most South African children cannot access formal early childhood development (ECD) provisions and are not exposed to quality early learning programmes before entering grades R and one (Kashin, 2016). Similarly, Kruger and Greyling (2015) noted that the children entering grade one do not have experience in a structured learning programme, thus, they are poorly prepared for formal schooling. The challenge for school heads in running ECD classes is no longer how to include the four to five-year-olds in the public primary schools but how to sustain quality education and care (Kamerman, 2006, 44).

The Eastern Cape Department (2008) reported that "The quality of learning and teaching in the Eastern Cape ECCE Centres has been found to be exceptionally low". Yet, if the learning offered in ECCE is not of acceptable quality, there are likely to be inherent problems in the holistic development of the children. Despite the pressure on public primary schools to offer quality ECCE in the next few years aiming at improving quality standards (Excell & Linington, 2011, 7), the major challenge is that public sector provision of ECD services cannot ensure quality ECD services (Atmore, van Niekerk & Ashley - Cooper, 2012). School heads are also required to learn new administrative roles and ECD teachers need to continuously upgrade their skills to meet the ECD learners' needs efficiently. Contrary to the expectations of the school heads and teachers in administrative roles, it has been noted that there are a lot of mushrooming private poor quality, poorly managed and unregistered ECD centres. There is evidence that childcare teachers teach ECD learners without specialised ECD training and this affects the quality of education and care offered (Kamerman, 2006, 53).

Several studies have been done on the quality of ECCE. Excell and Linington (2011, 9) found that ECD education is of low quality since the ECD teachers are not highly qualified and are getting minimal support from the school principals. Besides, the quality of ECD tuition is affected by the lack of remuneration for teachers as the communities cannot always raise funds for teachers' salaries (Bukaliya & Mubika, 2012, 30). Although several works have been done and better techniques have been suggested (Grinder & Kochanoff, 2007), a gap has been identified to address the quality of ECCE offered in preschools.

1.2. Quality in Early childhood care education

Global quality has been defined and measured in several ways, including adherence to a theoretical conceptualisation, the use of validated quality measurements and the application of quality rating improvement systems (QRISs). "Quality" is understood as an attribute of services for young children that ensures the efficient production of predefined, normative outcomes, typically developmental or simple learning goals. Quality measurement in early care and education programmes plays a central role in early childhood policy and programme initiatives such as state Quality Rating and improvement systems (QRis). According to the World Education Forum in Olaleye, Florence and Omotayo (2009), quality can be viewed from various perspectives. In terms of input of process (curriculum process implementation and reform) and results (development status and learning of children), quality is a relatively based concept that is wholly constructed and subjective, hence there is no single model of early childhood education that is effective in all settings. However, there is a general acceptance that programmes that benefit young children must be of a quality that is embedded within their families' cultures and values. In most studies, ECD education quality indicators consist of highly qualified personnel, offering guidance and counselling to the learners, having adequate human and material resources and having a child-centred learning environment (Excell & Linington, 2011, 10). Quality in early childhood education also includes those that relate directly to the children and activities in the curriculum content. However, this category includes learning activities, physical environment and evaluation of children's progress.

However, research addressing process or structural quality individually has revealed potential challenges with reducing global quality to the sum of two parts. For example, research has sometimes found that process quality measures are associated with structural quality features (Hestenes et al., 2015), but that finding is inconsistent (Slot, Leseman, Verhagen & Mulder, 2015). Literature indicates quality learning takes place when teachers are trained and can provide a learning environment in which a child can develop holistically, and to produce quality teachers, various training and education opportunities are made available through ECD qualifications and short skills programmes (Atmore, 2013).

According to Van Rensburg (2015, 119), the training level of the teachers is key to the attainment of school and learning readiness of Grade R learners and the author also argues that well-trained educationists follow an approach to education based on knowledge of how children learn and develop. The more the teacher reads, the more he/she becomes exposed to different ideas and understandings of different concepts related to his/her field of education.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The lens through which this study is viewed is through the Capability Approach by Amartya Sen (1992) as shown in Figure below.
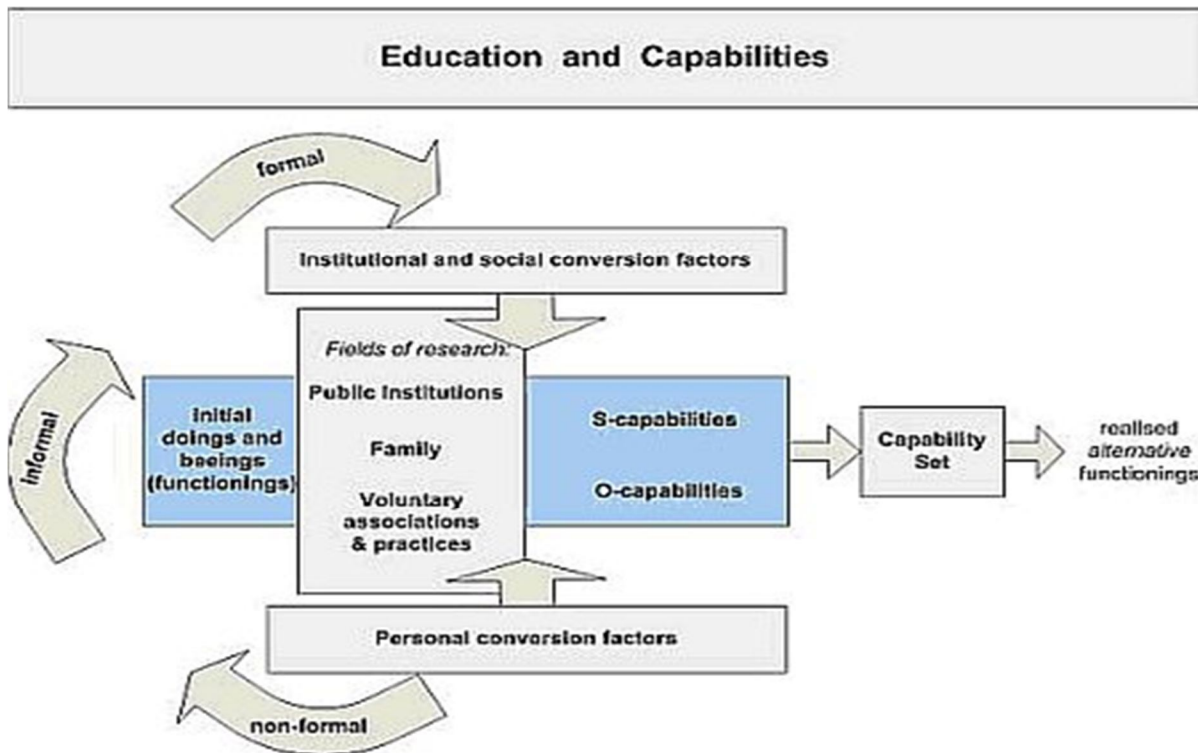
Figure 1: Source: Bielefeld University and University of Dortmund 2006: Proposal for a Graduate School of Education and Capabilities. Bielefeld/Dortmund

The relation between the capability perspective and education is, inter alia, acknowledged in the 2002 UNESCO Report "Education for all". This report suggests that policies should be "judged to be successful if they have enhanced people's capabilities. From this capability perspective, then, education is important for several reasons. The human capabilities approach to education recognises that education is intrinsically valuable as an end. Compared to other approaches the capability approach goes further, clarifying the diverse reasons for education's importance. Although many of the traditional instrumental arguments for education are accepted, the distinctive feature of the human capability approach is its assessment of policies not based on their impact on incomes, but on whether they expand the real freedoms that people value. Education is central to this process" (UNESCO 2002, 32-33). From a capability perspective, education might thus be appropriately regarded as a process of expanding capabilities as well as a process which decides whether individuals must remain in or are able to move beyond their 'sense of place'. Capabilities and functioning's are not free-floating but structured and shaped "by structural positioning and also by welfare institutions and levels of collective provision" (Lister 2004, 20). The capability approach therefore points to the necessity to analyse the "contingent circumstances, both personal and social" (Sen 1999, 70) to which individual capabilities depend. Education might be a means to expand capabilities, a means to convert assets into capabilities and it might also be a considered as a capability itself. This is simply because education has both intrinsic and instrumental value as Madoka Saito (2003, 25) point out.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as a qualitative research project. The aim of the study was to address the quality of early childhood care education in preschools. Guided by the interpretivists, purposive sampling procedure emerged as the most appropriate procedure for this study. In this context, therefore, purposive sampling enabled the researcher to identify two participants per ECD centre; one of them was a practitioner/teacher and a principal based on selected criteria of knowledge and ability. Thus, it was a definite plan for obtaining a representation from a given population. The researcher made use of a purposeful selection approach to sample five (5) preschools with two participants in each centre identified from the same geographical zone and its educational boundaries. Before the participants took part in the study, they were informed of the aim of the study. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity for participating in this study; hence, they were numbered using pseudo-names T1 for Teacher 1 and P1 for Principal 1. The researchers analysed the participants' responses, finding links and similarities in the responses and coded them appropriately. Then, the researchers abridged and positioned the results into themes.

4. RESULTS

How can the quality of ECCE programmes be improved?

The above question sought to find out from the participants, how to improve the quality.

P1A stated that

"…As a principal of the school, firstly, my main concern is the safety of a child. It is very important to bring essential strategies to the table by promoting physical health, social-emotional, language and cognitive developments well as books that will stimulate children's thinking"

However, **T1C** believes that

"…Departmental staff that comes and monitors will help improve quality as they will come for enrolling teachers for training on new programmes"

Therefore, in light of the above, 7 out of 10 participants agreed that having stimulating material for children is the best option. Also, training of teachers so that they can be updated with the new trends in education is the solution to improve on quality, which depends on teacher qualification and experience.

As **T1D** alluded that

"…If teachers could work with primary schools, that would be a healthy partnership

Even research demonstrates that to promote young children's success, we need to provide quality early care and educational experiences. Efforts to improve the quality of early care and education are partially motivated by the strong evidence that outcomes for young children may be substantially improved by using high-quality non-parental care (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan & Barnett, 2010). Improving the quality of ECCE centres through registration/licensing with provincial governments, expanded government subsidies for centres serving poor children, and an extensive training programme to improve staff qualifications remains the major focus of government plans for younger children (Biersteker, 2011; Department of Public Works, 2011; Government of South Africa, 2009). This is driven by the recognition that services must be of high quality if they are to place children on a better educational trajectory and improve the quality of learning in formal schooling (Department of Basic Education, 2010; Gustafsson, 2010; Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), 2011).

Hence, the quality imperative has also been reaffirmed as part of the Early Childhood Care and Education agenda for action of Education for All (UNESCO, 2010) to which South Africa is a signatory.

P1A believes that

"You can never be able to move forward if you do not have the right qualification. Book doesn't prepare you in every single thing but it helps you, gives you practical experience and guidelines. Teacher qualification matters, it helps you, it gives you that ability to help the child as most of the children these days have learning problem, so being qualified it does help you a lot".

As **T1D** alluded that

"Qualifications does effect quite immensely, because more qualified you are, the better you can teach your class, the easier for you to pick up problem some children might not be at a pace they should be, we find that every time we actually have a child that has some sort of learning difficult and if we ca pick that up only qualified teachers who can do that so to get the level of education that is needed, you do need to be educated. I do find that our little children 18 months it's not that important to have all the qualifications that age group I find that the most important is to have an amount of tremendous love and to have a lot of patience".

Quality of early childhood education depends on the qualification of ECD teachers, this is supported by Ackerman (2005) as he argued that teacher qualification has been identified by policy makers as one of the regulatable features and crucial variables that can predict quality in ECEC. It is, however, noted that the variable "teacher qualification" is not an intervention that was manipulated in the studies comprising the meta-analysis, but a characteristic of the teacher/care provider and a predictor variable in the studies. Approved early childhood teaching qualifications vary between states and across countries.

Visser (2021), pointed out that substantial number of ECD practitioners (78%) do not have an appropriate qualification to teach at preschool level, and 23% of ECD practitioners have no training of any sort. Additionally, not all ECD training courses are registered with relevant bodies such as the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Based on current literature, teacher qualification can be categorised according to their level and type of education. Level of education can be referred to formal schooling in primary, secondary and tertiary systems. The tertiary system can be categorised as community college, junior college and university. The details of intervention may also include years of education, course credits in any specialized early childhood or child development-related education, and title of programme.

However, in South Africa Practitioners are adult caregivers in charge of attending to a child's needs during their attendance in a centre. Guidelines state that they must be trained and receive continuous training in early childhood development care and education programmes. All practitioners should have the minimum qualification of a Basic Certificate in Early Childhood Development. This is listed as a National Qualification Framework (NQF) level 1 qualification. Practitioners must be physically and mentally healthy and capable of meeting all the demands of each child in the centre. Appropriate qualities that a practitioner should exhibit to care for children include being patient and respecting the gender, race, religion and language of each child in the centre. All efforts must be made to deal with staff grievances and minimise turnover (Department of Social Development, 2006). Guidelines for early childhood development care and education teachers are set out in a document by the Department of Social Development entitled Guidelines for Early Childhood Development Services (2006).

However, it can be argued that qualification equips practitioners with skills to facilitate holistic development of children in different types of settings. This is supported by the diagram below which reviews the evidence on how personnel variables relate to access to quality in ECCE.

Figure 2: Model of the relationship among personnel, programme quality, and child outcomes in ECCE settings
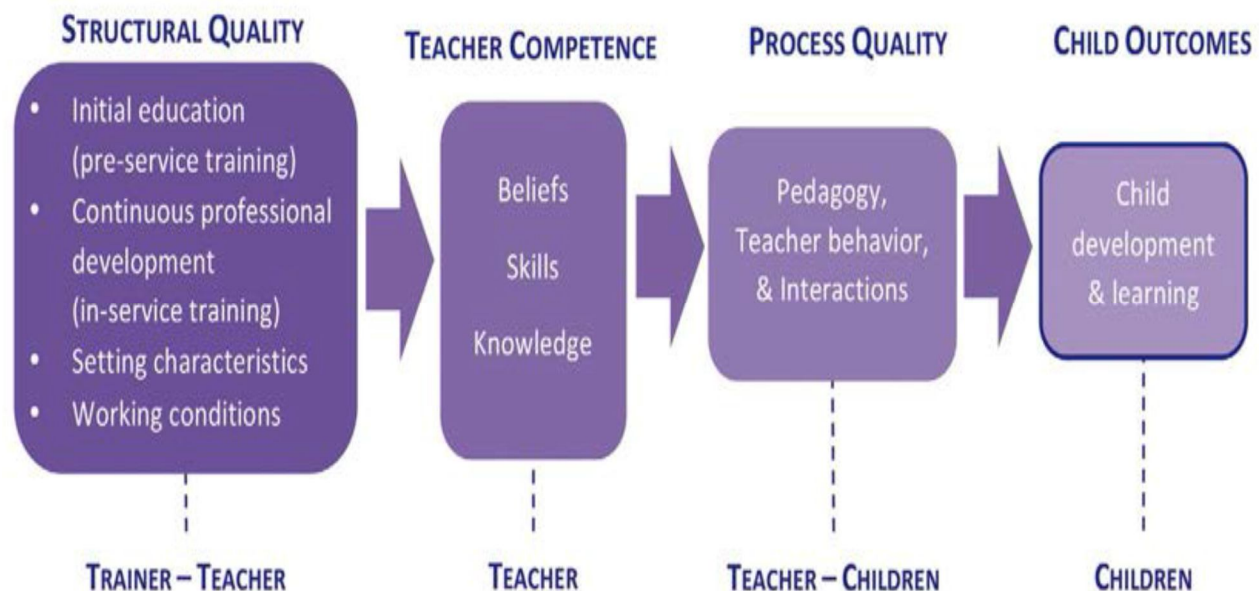
Source: (Adapted from Fukkink & Lont, 2007

The figure above shows the duration and intensity of teacher training can have significant effects on children's learning. However, studies consistently point to the importance of well-trained teachers to ECCE programme quality in developing countries (Engle et al., 2011; Behrman et al., 2013; Rao et al., 2014),

Therefore, the study confirms that quality of ECCE depends on the qualifications of the teachers as (Ebrahim, Killan & Rule, 2011; Ebrahim, Okwany & Berry, 2019; Peralto 2008; Wood 2013) mentioned quality ECCE is heavily dependent on suitably qualified practitioners who have in-depth understanding of what they are doing, why they are doing it and who reflect on how to continually improve their practice and adapt to challenges.

6. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to address the quality of early childhood care education. This study has, therefore, brought the researcher to the conclusion, in which the question formulated have been investigated and therefore aims met. Early learning is impacted by the quality of education provided. There has been contention as to what quality education means and what it entails. Frempong, Reddy and Kenjee (2011) define quality schooling in terms of social justice theory and capabilities, "stating that education is characterised in terms of its relation to fostering key capabilities that individuals, communities and society, in general, have reason to value". Therefore, quality education is possible even in deprived environments if those communities find distinctions that make a place work. Bruce (2015) attempted to define what quality education entails from a global perspective that quality education is about three things: the child, the context in which learning takes place and the knowledge and understanding in which the child develops and learns. Amongst other things, it is self-discipline. This is the kind of discipline that is worth having. In addition, most evaluations of ECCE programmes, whether community or teacher-based, tend to focus only on cognitive development.

Thus, cognitive readiness becomes the sole focus of whether a child will adapt to school life. A child whose cognitive development is age appropriate may still be left behind in social and emotional development and consequently, struggle in school. This was one of the few studies focusing on the quality of ECCE. This comprehensive approach to addressing the quality of early childhood care education development in underserved areas provided an overview of the interaction of school readiness in East London communities, in the Eastern Cape.

Therefore, the study showed that providing high quality education that yields positive outcomes for children is at the core of policy programmes and initiatives in the early years of learning globally. Most importantly, the training teacher qualification is what constitutes quality education.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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