



Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Care and Education Provisioning: Towards Empowered Communities

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Abstract

Early Childhood Care and Education provide opportunities for children to develop holistically to flourish after their early years. Families and preschool environments influence children's development. However, preschool experiences are not the primary factor in a child's development during early learning, hence the foundations laid by the family matter most during the children's early years. Hence, communities, parents, and caregivers need to ensure that children's holistic development is realized and this begins from conception. During the early years, community collaborations that benefit children are often encouraged. Children may miss out on learning and developmental chances, and their brain development and capacity to thrive later in life may be jeopardized if partnerships between communities and early childhood centres are not realized and achieved. Research suggests that caregivers, parents, and communities are not completely involved in their children's early learning, and this impacts negatively on the provision of ECCE services. Hence, this paper investigates how early childhood education is conceptualized to empower communities. The cooperation theory which emphasizes interpersonal contact among various stakeholders with varied roles to achieve a shared goal, was adopted. Ten communities from Chris Hani District Municipality were purposefully chosen to be included in the study using the qualitative research approach and interpretive paradigm. Data collection tools included focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that stakeholders are working in silos for the ECCE provisioning as the research participants were not aware of the services rendered by other stakeholders. Practitioners mentioned lack of parental involvement as another factor compromising the provision of ECCE. Parents seemed to be unaware of their responsibility when it comes to early learning. In empowering communities about their involvement in the provision of ECCE, the paper suggests community dialogues with the cooperation of other stakeholders, including government departments. In addition, parents need to be engaged in their children's early learning by providing caring and nurturing environments that support children's holistic development from their early years for them to thrive even beyond their childhood years.

Keywords: community empowerment, ECCE provisioning, professionalisation, stakeholder collaboration, sustainable development

1. Introduction

With the understanding that "learning begins at birth," participating member states of the Jomtien Conference decided to promote the objectives of Education for All (EFA), giving rise to the concept of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (UNESCO, 1990:28). Research suggests that first 1000 days of a child's life are crucial because this is when learning begins. Therefore, the first 1000 days are perceived as the best time to begin brain stimulation by exposing young children to early childhood learning. To prevent children from missing out on learning and developmental opportunities, community collaborations that benefit children are frequently encouraged during the early years. Nonetheless, studies reveal that communities, parents, and caregivers are not fully engaged in their children's early learning which jeopardizes the provision of meaningful ECCE services. Hence, this paper aims to investigate how early childhood education is conceptualized to empower communities.

1.1. ECCE In Context

The development of health, learning, and behaviour from the prenatal period through the transition phase to primary school is known as Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (UNICEF, 2017). It begins when the woman becomes pregnant and ends when the child turns eight years old. Children who receive quality early education will grow to their full potential as adults and be able to contribute to society, the economy, and civic life (UNESCO, 2021). By taking part in ECCE, children become more prepared for school and the gap between advantaged and underprivileged children at the beginning of school is lessened. It also improves academic performance and keeps things from happening again. Therefore, for young children to develop, play, learn, and grow, a variety of stakeholders, including families, communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and government departments must work together to support and nurture young children's development to become well-rounded citizens through meaningful early learning programmes (Akkari, 2022; Saroch, 2021). Countries need to invest in ECCE and ensure that a designed curriculum is implemented as planned and support is rendered to ECCE professionals to become responsive to the needs of children from diverse communities.

1.2. Provisioning of Early Childhood and Care Education in South Africa

South Africa has adopted numerous policies to prioritize ECCE programs catering to all children. The policies were aimed at "redressing the wrongs of the past and upholding the rights of the child" to ensure that children thrive beyond their childhood years (Harrison, 2020:3). The policies focussed on the children's development from conception until the year before children become seven years old if they have exceptional needs (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2021; Harrison, 2020). Because ECCE is multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder by nature, providing a coordinated structure that outlines the roles of parents, communities, different government ministries and departments, development partners, and other stakeholders in provisioning ECCE is fundamental. Even though government departments are involved in providing ECCE services, local government authorities like municipalities have a significant role to play, especially in regulating land use for childcare facilities. Hence, Zulu et al. (2022) argue that to support the expansion of early learning services and programmes, the local government must ensure that infrastructure facilities that fulfil minimal health and safety standards are constructed for meaningful ECCE provisioning.

This is because setting up the right infrastructure for teaching and learning activities is important for children's development. Hence, the decent infrastructure for meaningful ECCE provisioning needs to consist of equipment including, play and sports areas, classrooms that are roomy and well-ventilated, basic utilities, and sufficient sanitary facilities. These are necessary for a child's holistic development and for providing high-quality care and education (Zulu et al., 2022).

Quality ECCE curricula should be grounded in children's rights, needs, inclusivity, and understanding of sustainable development, as stated in the National Curriculum Framework for children ages 0 to 4 (Atmore et al., 2019). From the framework, it is mentioned that the curriculum should be flexible to enable early learning instructors to modify their methods to fit the demands and situations of young children and those of the community. The needs and abilities of the young children that ECCE programmes are intended for should be considered while designing training sessions on best practices (Moses, 2021). Additionally, employing all five senses in communication, play, engagement, exploration, and discovery should be emphasised in the curriculum. To help the teacher build on the experiences and activities that foster the child's development and education, the curriculum should be a beehive of ongoing assessment and evaluation programmes that are expected to be developed through observation and listening to each learner (Hannaway et al., 2019). Learning in ECCE settings is supposed to be child-centered, and early childhood educators should be able to comprehend the learning and developmental needs of the children to ensure the proper provisioning of quality meaningful ECCE services.

The collaboration among stakeholders to improve children's experiences in ECD settings is the most important component of the ECCE curriculum in South Africa (Moses, 2021). By creating jobs that directly benefit children, parent inclusion enhances the quality of life for community members, raises awareness to improve the parenting and care of individuals who are not directly served, and maximises resources by utilising material and social resources to support programming. Parent participation programmes are crucial to the execution of ECCE programmes. It's unclear, though, how much weight these factors have in ECCE provisioning. Contrary to those in urban areas, where many parents can afford to pay adequate fees on top of the subsidy received from the education department as registered centres, many stakeholders feel that inequalities in the provisioning of ECCE have not been addressed as expected. This situation is aggravated by centres in informal settlements, townships, and rural areas, as they lack proper facilities and infrastructure (Harrison, 2020). They must use the same curriculum despite having unsuitable or insufficient learning materials, poorly qualified early childhood educators, and inadequate resources. In South Africa, 65 percent of children enrolled in early learning programmes do not thrive by age five as they are not developing cognitively or physically as they should. Hence, such children often face obstacles in their path, which reduces the likelihood that they will reach their full potential and be prepared for school (DBE, 2022; Heckman, 2022; Venter, 2022).

Some stakeholders have raised issues regarding monitoring and support by different actors as providing support and monitoring by different structures is not done properly (Harrison 2020). Even with the registered ECD centres monitoring is not done properly and some providers do not fulfil their role as provided by Schedule 4 Part B of the Constitution. They also think that many municipalities do not understand their roles because they do not include ECCE in their IDPs (Zulu et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

Given the above issues raised by different stakeholders, it is unclear whether provisioning structures at national, provincial, and local government levels work together to manage and provide ECCE services as enshrined in relevant policies. It is unclear whether stakeholders

involved in ECCE provisioning understand their roles and responsibilities, hence this paper examines how early childhood education is conceptualized to empower communities.

1.2.1. Objectives of the Paper

This paper seeks to:

- Find out the role of intersectoral collaboration in the provisioning of ECCE.
- Examine the involvement of communities in the provisioning of ECCE.
- Explore the involvement of parents in the provisioning of ECCE.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

For this paper, Robotka's (1947) cooperation theory was used. According to this theory, to accomplish a common objective, different stakeholders must have interpersonal ties and communicate to achieve a common goal. The theory looks at the circumstances that encourage cooperative behaviour in individuals or groups, hence, it was found to be appropriate for this paper. Moreover, the cooperative theory encourages stakeholders to collaborate rather than solely pursue their interests. As a result, it also looks at how stakeholders may promote cooperation, reputation, social norms, reciprocity, altruism, and trust (Gardner et al., 2016). For this article, children may benefit from the collaboration of various stakeholders to provide meaningful early childhood education (ECE) and be better prepared for formal schooling. To ensure that children receive the early childhood care they deserve, this cooperation may also help identify factors that influence goal accomplishment and develop strategies to solve such obstacles.

2. Body of Paper

2.1. Introduction

Over time, there has been progress in the delivery of early childhood education (ECE). Nevertheless, there has been fragmented and poorly integrated ECCE provisioning (Beckman, 2022). This has affected young children as their basic right to education was violated. Although the early childhood sector is often perceived as multi-sectoral, ensuring that all stakeholders play a pivotal role in ECCE provisioning remains a challenge. Hence, the paper examines that to ensure that children are not disadvantaged. Moreover, research indicates that children who receive high-quality early childhood development services are better equipped for formal education (Beckman, 2022).

2.2. Methods

Qualitative interpretative research techniques were used for this paper to guide the data collection and analysis procedures. The underlying tenet of the interpretative paradigm is that people give their environments meaning through communication (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Hence, qualitative research participants are examined in natural settings (Cropley, 2022). The sample comprised ten communities from the Chris Hani District Municipality which were chosen using purposeful sampling. Through purposive sampling, the researcher selected people with information regarding the phenomenon being studied (Kelly & Codeiro, 2020). From the 10 communities of Chris Hani Municipality, five ECD centres were chosen. From the selected ECD centres, five early years teachers, ten parents, one ward committee, and 1 education official were selected. In total, the sample comprised of 17 research participants. Because the subjects were observed in their normal environments, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were the methods used to collect the data for a more in-depth

interaction with the selected subjects. According to Babbie (2021), the selected data collection instruments enable participants to voice their opinions regarding the topic under study. Speaking one's mind promotes constructivism, which is consistent with the interpretative paradigm selected. Data triangulation was achieved through different data collection instruments and the selection of several participants. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The following factors guaranteed the rigor and trustworthiness of the research: transferability, confirmability, credibility, and dependability.

2.3. Results and Discussion

Because the research participants were unaware of the services provided by other stakeholders regarding ECD, the data obtained indicated that stakeholders are functioning in silos for the ECCE provisioning. Furthermore, the data made it clear that there is little parental participation, which jeopardizes the provision of ECCE. Regarding their part in early learning, parents appeared to be completely unaware of the role they should play. The difficulties faced by the ECD sector during the transition from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the DBE were also seen as having a detrimental effect on the delivery of ECCE. Finally, backlogs and infrastructure issues make it difficult to guarantee that early childhood development centres are secure and supportive of young children's learning. From the findings, themes to be discussed are ECD function shift, the role of stakeholders, and infrastructural challenges.

2.3.1. ECD Function Shift

For this paper, the professionalization of the ECD workforce and curriculum creation and execution are key components of the ECD function transfer. It was clear from the data gathered that the early learning teachers in the ECD centres do not base their programme design on the National Curriculum Framework. This is true even though curriculum development and the creation of high-quality learning and play materials are essential for the provisioning of ECCE (UNESCO, 2021). The National Early Learning Development Standards offer precise guidelines and expectations for children from 0 -4 years. In addition, Guidelines for ECCE stakeholders are provided by the South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from 0 – 4 years (Department of Social Development, 2015). The ECCE curriculum encourages teachers to assist children by concentrating on their interests and developmental activities through play-based approaches (Akkari, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Despite some efforts made, there is evidence that not much has been done in other countries to ensure that young children are provided with meaningful early learning programmes (UNESCO, 2021).

Hence, some youngsters in most countries have been deprived of their right to an education due to unequal provision to diverse populations. Due to the unequal curriculum delivery resulting from the ECD function shift in South Africa, there are still unqualified teachers in ECCE, which negatively impacts developing children. Once more, several stakeholders believe that the disparities in service delivery have not been addressed as anticipated because centres in townships, informal settlements, and rural areas lack adequate infrastructure and facilities. Many parents in urban areas can afford to pay sufficient fees in addition to the DSD subsidy for registered centres (Harrison, 2020), however, children still do not receive adequate preparation during their early years.

2.3.2. The Role of Stakeholders

Individuals from various organisations with a vested interest in the development and meaningful learning of young children are the stakeholders for this article (Malete, 2013). The data gathered made it clear that parental participation is minimal, services provided by stakeholders are not coordinated, and the roles of stakeholders in improving the provision of ECCE are not clearly articulated. While ECCE provision has improved over time, research shows that ECCE projects have been dispersed, badly managed, and underfunded, with inadequate infrastructure and other resources (Beckman, 2022). Therefore, the development of laws and regulations, as well as the administration and oversight of all ECCE, continue to depend heavily on the role that cooperating stakeholders play. According to Moses (2021), the South African ECCE curriculum requires teachers to collaborate with parents to comprehend the experiences of the children. This is because parental inclusion raises awareness, improves parenting and care for those who are not directly served, and maximizes resources by utilizing social and material assets to support programming. It also helps community members build their livelihoods by giving them work in an area that directly benefits children.

2.3.3. Infrastructural Challenges

Adequate safe space is essential for children to play freely. Learning in ECCE settings should be child-centered, and the teacher should understand his or her children's learning needs (Venter, 2022). According to the data gathered, this was not the case because backlogs and infrastructure issues continued to jeopardize the delivery of ECCE. As a result, little children's safety cannot be assured. Furthermore, the information gathered demonstrated this as many ECD settings lack an appropriate environment for young children's growth and learning. Such learning environments need to be safe, clean, and hygienic for young children not contract communicable diseases while at the ECD centre. Thus, inadequate space and overcrowding, dilapidated classroom buildings, inadequate hygienic amenities, and restricted access to pure water as mentioned by Akkari (2022) compromise the provisioning of ECCE.

3. Conclusion

In summary, the provisioning of ECCE is curtailed by inadequacies in funding, infrastructure, learning, and teaching materials, and in some cases low levels of qualifications of practitioners, insufficient training, lack of professional support, and poor working conditions. From the data collected, it was evident that communities need to understand their role in the provisioning of ECCE through the collaboration of different stakeholders. As ECD is multi-sectoral; there is a need for more coordinated interaction among stakeholders to empower communities in rendering ECCE services for the benefit of young children. This suggests that to empower communities regarding their participation in the provisioning of ECCE, ongoing community conversations with diverse populations are necessary to empower communities regarding their roles in the provision of ECCE. In addition, parents, who are their children's primary caregivers, must participate in their early education by creating the safe, nurturing conditions that are essential for a child's holistic development and help the child flourish long after childhood. Broad stakeholder consultation should be a continuous process to build a cohesive and rationalized sector programme at the micro, meso, and macro levels, allowing the stakeholders to support and oversee the provision of early childhood education. This will further strengthen community partnerships.

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