

CHAPTER 13

Early Childhood Development Centre Managers' Provision of Comprehensive Quality Programmes: Policy Implementation

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Abstract

The establishment of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) in 2015 aimed at defining a national comprehensive early childhood development (ECD) programme and support with identified essential components inclusive of national, provincial, and local spheres of government. This study's purpose is to explore ECD centre managers' understandings of how provision for comprehensive quality early childhood development programmes can be made in their centres with specific reference to the aims of the

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NIECDP. Using Wenger's Communities of Practice theory, this study focuses on ECD centre managers' experiences of providing integrated programmes that are aligned with the policy's expectations. The study was conducted in 10 community ECD centres located in rural and peri-urban contexts in Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces. Five ECD centre managers from each province were purposefully sampled for the study to interpret their understandings of provisioning of comprehensive quality programmes in their ECD centres. An interpretive qualitative case study methodological design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews and structured observations were used to generate credible and trustworthy data that were beyond generalisation. Findings revealed that some ECD centre managers lacked knowledge of the NIECDP. As a result, no provisioning of comprehensive quality ECD programmes that were overarched by multi-sectoral bodies as per the framework were implemented. ECD centre managers from underprivileged rural and peri-urban contexts worked in silos, as it was evidently clear that there was no collaboration with other provincial departments in ensuring the provision of a comprehensive quality ECD programme.

Keywords: early childhood development centre managers, collaboration, comprehensive quality early childhood development programme

Introduction

This chapter reports the findings from a large-scale research study funded by the European Union (EU) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The study was conducted in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape provinces. The significance of early childhood development (ECD), its management in collaboration with other sectors, the professionalisation of the sector, and the spaces used for learning can never be overemphasised. The ECD sector is a global phenomenon that is becoming increasingly popular (Shioji et al., 2017; Department of Social Development, 2015; Atmore, 2019). It is a priority area within the South African context and is supported by legislation, national policies, and strategies (Meier & Marais, 2012).

The literature reviewed on the phenomenon indicates that the ECD sector is characterised by various attributes that describe its existence and operation by many involved in it. Although ECD's significance

is typically adopted globally, its existence is rapidly taking its toll on education provisioning (van Niekerk et al., 2017; Atmore, 2019). As a result, various attributes are associated with it and with the evolution of policies that aim to regulate the sector. Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the government has developed policies including the Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development, White Paper 5, and the laws that acknowledge children's universal right to early childhood development as well as the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP). In light of this, Vargas-Barón (2014, p. 1) affirms that the latter policy should be multisectoral and include 'education, health, nutrition, sanitation, and protection'. In elaboration, it should 'provide a general framework for operational planning, including the vision, mission, goal, core concepts, objectives and strategies' for ECD. Douglass (2019, p. 6) maintains that 'research shows that children learn, grow, and thrive in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings when those settings are characterised by high quality interactions and relationships'.

The study's purpose was to explore ECD centre managers' understandings of how provision for comprehensive quality ECD programmes can be made in their centres with specific reference to the aims of the NIECDP (Department of Social Development, 2015). The NIECDP aimed to redress inequitable access to early childhood education by ensuring that access is available through an integrated national system that has a basis within a coherent legal framework that identifies, enables, and entrusts ECD roles and responsibilities relevant to role players. In effect, there was an establishment of organisational and institutional arrangements necessary to monitor the provision of ECD services and support (Mbarathi et al., 2016; Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018; Harrison, 2020). Meanwhile, ECD centre managers are the drivers of quality programmes (Douglass, 2019).

Within the process of policy implementation, this research study sought to respond to the research question: What knowledge do early childhood development (ECD) centre managers have about the implementation of the NIECDP of 2015 for the provision of comprehensive ECD programmes?

To answer the above research question, the initial part of this chapter presents the literature review on the evolution of ECD policies in South Africa post-1994 and the ECD managers' roles and responsibilities for the provision of comprehensive programmes and services.

Thereafter, the theoretical framework, research methodology, and methods used for data generation are comprehensively presented. Results from the engagement with the ECD centre managers and discussions of findings are consequently provided. Finally, the culmination of this research study is marked by the implications for practice and concluding contemplations regarding the phenomenon of ECD.

The Evolution of ECD Policies in South Africa Post-1994

The establishment of the pioneer Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (DoE, 1996) immediately after democracy in South Africa relates to children aged 0 to 9 years and promotes the holistic development of the child, emphasising interdepartmental collaboration. Subsequently, White Paper 5 (DoE, 2001) placed an emphasis on the importance of early childhood education. Its goals were to ensure that every child receives at least one year of preschool education before formal schooling. The National Early Learning Development Standards (NELDS) were later published as a curriculum-related policy focusing on children's early learning needs from birth to four years (DoE, 2009). The South African government identified the need and aimed to increase access to ECD and to enhance the quality of ECD programmes and services, specifically for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018). The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) was ultimately developed in 2015. The policy aimed at defining a national comprehensive early childhood development (ECD) programme. This policy was the first multisectoral plan of action, specifically targeted at early childhood development and all national departments' services. These services included birth registration, child and maternal health, nutrition, immunisation, referral services for health and social services, early learning programmes, and water and sanitation (Department of Social Development, 2015).

In that same year, the National Curriculum Framework (DBE, 2015) was established to address early learning development areas (ELDAs) of the child's first 1000 days and to provide guidance for those developing programmes and working with babies, toddlers, and young children. With ECD often viewed as the most critical stage of any child's development, Desmond et al. (2019) maintain that investing in

children's education has the potential to generate benefits across their lifespan and broader society. Ultimately, the government recognised the sector as a critical enabler for attaining sustained economic development (Republic of South Africa, 2015). This effort was applauded by many involved within the sector, most notably the Department of Social Development (DSD), as it was tasked to be the custodian of the sector.

ECD Centre Managers' Roles and Responsibilities for the Provision of Comprehensive Programmes and Services

The initiative to conduct this research study was prompted by the challenges experienced by ECD centre managers located in under-privileged contexts. According to the Department of Social Development (2015), centre managers are responsible for several management tasks to achieve a thriving ECD centre, including the knowledge and understanding of policies that regulate the sector. Along with these declarations, ECD centre managers, in particular, were tasked with implementing the NIECDP in their centres, as they were regarded as the parties that focused on designing programmes, performing the leadership tasks of an ECD centre, and working with people effectively (Meier & Marais, 2012; Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018). In this regard, ECD centre managers should be well informed on education policies (Langford, 2007).

ECD centre managers' roles and responsibilities include, amongst others, enrolment duties and supervision of the curriculum. They are responsible for physical assets and equipment and are in charge of finances, staff relationships, providing leadership in parent involvement and education, planning for health and safety, and building and maintaining good community relations (Department of Social Development, 2015; Mbarathi et al., 2016). Literature reveals that most ECD centre managers, regrettably, are tasked with undoubtedly complex and multifaceted roles (Meier & Marais, 2012), and for several centre managers these complexities are exacerbated by their level of qualifications and training (Langford, 2007). Douglass (2019, p. 8) upholds that 'centre leaders may play a role in fostering positive workplace relationships, a culture of learning and improvement, shared decision-making, and staff professional development'.

Research studies prove that ECD centre managers have failed to provide comprehensive ECD programmes as per NIECDP (2015) requirements (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018; Desmond et al., 2019). In accordance, Atmore (2019) confirms that ECD centre managers' failure to provide comprehensive ECD programmes in most instances is exacerbated by their lack of knowledge of the policy and its content. Ultimately, different training organisations came on board to capacitate ECD centre managers with knowledge and understanding of the sector's policies. For example, the Ikamva Labantu was a non-profit organisation (NPO) that aimed to support ECD centre managers in understanding the importance of stimulation for children and in focusing on managing ECD centres as a business. Van Niekerk et al. (2017, p. 4) attest that 'principals' leadership and governance abilities were enhanced to enable a more effective management'.

Conversely, the exercise in some instances proved futile, as most ECD centre managers from underprivileged contexts were disregarded. Such occurrences are per Surty's (2011) statement on rural education and its implications on education. The author states that the government itself neglects teachers in typically remote and relatively underdeveloped areas.

Fundamentally, most ECD centres in underprivileged contexts remain unregistered with the DSD because they failed to meet the DSD's standards. These standards relate to the quality of infrastructure, safety and health in the learning environment, sanitation, water, and electricity (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018). Hence, the unregistered status of most of these ECD centres remains a problem, which in most instances further aggravates marginalisation. Besides, the failure of centres to register denies them the right to apply for needed subsidised government funding (Atmore et al., 2012).

Concerning the provision of a comprehensive quality ECD programme as per government directive, the study seeks to understand ECD centre managers' understanding of the NIECDP (2015) to provide comprehensive ECD programmes and universally available and equitable ECD services (DSD, 2015). The presentation of an aspirational statement in a policy is provocative. The policy further indicates that it aims to strengthen delivery and equity of access through the design, location, and integration of services into a diversity of delivery models. Subsequently, an essential component of this package that will be delivered includes ante- and post-natal health; birth screening and

nutrition services; social services such as free birth registration, social grants and child protection services; parenting support; and opportunities for early learning (DSD, 2015). According to the policy, all services were to be integrated into and delivered across the full continuum of care settings, starting in the home with the parents, and moving to out-of-home childcare arrangements, community-based programmes (non-centre based), and facility- or centre-based programmes (DSD, 2015; Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice theory (CoP) underpinned this study. The theory further helped in understanding the knowledge that ECD centre managers have regarding the provisioning of comprehensive ECD programmes that complement the multisectoral nature of ECD. Wenger's CoP theory galvanises clusters of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who learn how to do it better as they regularly collaborate (1998). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002, p. 4) further elucidate that 'communities of practice share a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis' (p. 4). They share a common goal, expertise, and passion for a joint enterprise. In context, the NIECDP (2015) advocates for the collaboration between different sectors engaged in ECD. It further states that all services will be integrated into and delivered across the full continuum of care settings, starting in the home with the parents, moving to out-of-home childcare arrangements, community-based programmes (non-centre based), and facility- or centre-based programmes. Therefore, such a directive calls for mutual sharing and learning based on the common interest that exists within the parties involved (Lesser & Storck, 2001). Accordingly, the chosen theory helped in understanding the three characteristics necessary for a community bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Therefore, it was selected to understand how ECD managers participate in meaningful learning experiences for policy implementation with others involved.

Wenger's (2009) characteristics of a functional CoP are domain, community, and practice.

Domain

According to Smith et al. (2017, p. 211), the domain is basically ‘the area of knowledge that brings the community together, gives it its identity, and defines the key issues that members need to address.’ In this context, the domain is the ECD sector, which is earnestly concerned with the holistic well-being and development of babies, toddlers, and young children.

Community

According to Smith et al. (2017, p. 211), ‘community is the group of people for whom the domain is relevant, the quality of the relationships among members, and the definition of the boundary between the inside and the outside’. Authors further purport that for a group of people to constitute a CoP, its members must come together around ideas or topics of interest (the domain) and interact with each other to learn together. In context, ECD services and their multisectoral nature call for collaboration within all the departments involved (Department of Health, Department of Home Affairs, Department of Social Development, and Department of Basic Education), researchers, academia, parents, community members, and leaders (DSD, 2015).

Practice

According to Smith et al. (2017, p. 211), practice is ‘the body of knowledge, methods, tools, stories, cases, [and] documents, which members share and develop together to address recurring problems in their specific contexts’. In context, the practice entails how the multisectoral elements bring synergy to the ECD sector in ensuring the provision of comprehensive ECD programmes and services. However, this will come to fruition only if the multisectoral elements possess the required knowledge of methods, tools, documents, and engagement within the ECD sector.

Research Methods and Design

Petty et al. (2012, p. 1) define research methodology as ‘the theoretical, political and philosophical backgrounds to social research and their

implications for research practice and the use of particular research methods'. Following the authors' articulation, the researchers adopted an exploratory multiple case study methodological approach. The multiple case study (MCS) approach assisted the researchers in experimenting with more robustness with the conclusions that were to be reached (Yin, 2018). The study was framed within the interpretivists' lens. The interpretive researchers believe that there are sets of realities or truths about the world (Creswell, 2013) that can best be interpreted by the occupants of that context. Therefore, 10 ECD centre managers from community ECD centres in rural and peri-urban contexts located in Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces (South Africa) were purposefully sampled to elicit credible data. To be precise, five ECD centre managers from each province were purposefully sampled.

ECD centre managers received the least assistance and had barely any form of communication with different government sectors such as the Department of Social Development (DSD), Department of Basic Education (DBE), Department of Health (DoE), or Department of Home Affairs (DoHA). These ECD centres had no resources or very minimal resources, and infrastructure that spurs young learners' learning and parental involvement was also absent. This is believed to be unexceptional in most underprivileged ECD centres. These circumstances often result from a lack of funds and sponsorship from different stakeholders and provincial departments (Ebrahim & Pascal, 2016).

Data were generated through the use of semi-structured interviews and structured observations. A three-month data production process was undertaken by the Project for Early Childhood Education Policy Analysis (PECPA) research assistants based in two provinces—KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Eastern Cape (EC). During the data generation period, all 10 ECD managers (5 from each province) were willing to share their experiences regarding the knowledge they had about implementing the policy.

Research participants employed by PECPA engaged in face-to-face conversations with the ECD centre managers to understand how they interpret their real-life situation of managing the ECD centres in rural and peri-urban geographical settings. It was apparent that the sampled participants experienced numerous challenges related to their geographical zoning and knowledge of the policy. Medina and Arcila (2013, p. 28) corroborate the existence of challenges for practitioners

in underprivileged contexts by affirming that ‘teachers who work in rural areas face adverse working circumstances and are immersed in conditions of under-qualification, inadequate support and poor remuneration.’ In both provinces, PECPA research assistants also conducted structured observations during their visits to the research sites. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 2018) and Petty et al. (2012) substantiate a need for observing live settings through structured observations instead of relying on second-hand accounts. Generated data were analysed and arranged thematically to avoid distortion, as Denzin states (2018). Denzin (2018) also suggests that analysing data thematically helps present trustworthy and credible data with avoidance of generalisation. As a result, the authors used a manual colour-coding strategy to identify the codes that later gelled into themes. This entailed the process of grouping data from the semi-structured interviews and structured observations as Denzin (2018) suggests.

The ethical clearance to conduct this large-scale PECPA project was obtained from the University of Fort Hare, Eastern Cape, South Africa, which served as the project’s leading institution (REC-270710-028-RA Level 0).

Results and Discussion

The impetus to conduct this study was driven by a critical research question: What knowledge do early childhood development (ECD) centre managers have about the implementation of the National Integration Early Childhood Development Policy of 2015 to provide comprehensive ECD programmes? Thus, findings presented in themes are a result of engagement with ECD centre managers purposively sampled. Research participants’ codes were utilised to distinguish the participants (ECDC Manager 1–10 and an abbreviation for the province’s name were used).

Theme 1: ECD Centre Managers’ Lack of Knowledge of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2015)

The participants’ foremost concern was that they do not have any knowledge of the NIECDP and its content. It was evident that the few individuals who did were unable to implement it accordingly in their

ECD centres. Such findings were realised and unfolded in accordance with the conduct that was observed from the participants' regular management of their centres. Modise (2021) suggests that it is unfortunate that most ECD centre managers find it difficult to understand national and international legislation and regulations regarding children's rights and protection. From the questions that were asked concerning their knowledge of the policy, the participants said:

It is my first time hearing about that policy. Never ... I don't know it.
(ECDC manager 1, KZN, rural)

The policy document was delivered here, but I have never read or used it because I do not know how to. (ECDC manager 1, EC, rural)

The policy is very long, I do not have time to read all that is written there. I suggest that the department sends people to train us on this policy and also teach us how to apply it. (ECDC manager 4, EC, peri-urban)

Findings revealed that ECD centre managers commonly do not know the ECD policies at all. Accordingly, Nores and Barnett (2010) state that ECD services' variable dispensation and the incomplete fragmented legislative policy framework for ECD result in uncoordinated service delivery. Data further revealed that ECD centre managers were concerned that they were not receiving appropriate training to understand their centres' policies and professional management. According to van Niekerk et al. (2017), many centre managers set up their ECD centres because of a need in the community and their love for children, although they often do not have the business management or leadership skills to manage the business side of the ECD centre effectively. Notably, the authors' proclamations respond to the participants' response to outsiders' overreliance on training them in ECD management skills.

Theme 2: Non-Implementation of Comprehensive Quality ECD Programmes

The study established that generally there is non-implementation of comprehensive quality ECD programmes in most ECD centres located in marginalised contexts compared with their affluent counterparts. Baloyi and Makhubele (2018) are concerned about the mushrooming

of ECD programmes, particularly in rural areas, resulting in the disregarding of competency issues by both authorities and ECD centre managers. There were various validations from the participants that complemented the occurrence.

I was once invited to attend the centre managers' meeting, but those people from the government failed to explain to us how we have to implement it in our centres. (ECDC manager 5, KZN, rural)

I have never implemented the policy, but I know that in this centre we offer quality ECD programmes. (ECDC manager 3, KZN, peri-urban)

We have minimal space here. All children, irrespective of their age, are in one room. (ECDC manager 5, EC, rural)

Regrettably, non-implementation of policies becomes the case in most ECD centres located in underprivileged settings, as they fail to attract appropriately qualified practitioners who will understand ECD policies and implement them accordingly (Surtly, 2011). From the observations done, it was evident that some ECD centre managers endeavoured to offer quality ECD programmes amid challenging conditions. Atmore (2013, p. 156) corroborates that 'quality teaching and learning is essential for effective early development'. Therefore, a good teacher can provide a learning environment in which a child can develop optimally and in a holistic manner despite adverse conditions.

Theme 3: ECD Centre Managers Working in Silos

This theme emerged as a result of expressions of frustration from the participants. As maintained by Wenger (1998, 2009), communities should share a concern or a passion for something they do and should learn how to do it better as they regularly collaborate. From the question that was posed, it was crystal clear that there was a lack of collaboration among ECD centre managers, communities, and stakeholders. This was perpetuated by numerous challenges, including a lack of commitment, a lack of confidence in the profession, and the execution of duties by teachers working in underprivileged contexts (Surtly, 2011).

No one is prepared to come closer. They say this is my thing. (ECDC manager 2, KZN, rural)

Parents here are interested in getting paid when they have assisted us with some maintenance tasks, not in their children's well-being. (ECDC manager 3, EC, rural)

Health workers sometimes come here to check whether learners have done their routine vaccinations. (ECDC manager 2, EC, rural)

Department of Home Affairs has never visited our centre to assist those children who have problems with their birth certificates. This is very difficult because if they do not have birth certificates, they can't receive the social grant. (ECDC manager 4, KZN, rural)

From the findings, there seems to be a lack of collaboration between different sectors involved in the ECD sector. The findings are therefore in contrast with the idea that 'communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger, 2009, p. 1).

Literature reveals that most ECD centres in underprivileged communities experience low living standards that stem from the historical neglect of people living in underprivileged contexts, which has resulted in severe social inequalities (Rudolph et al., 2019; Ebrahim & Pascal, 2016; UNESCO, 2014). Such low living standards and inequalities contribute to a lack of synergy between stakeholders and prompt ECD centre managers to work in silos.

Theme 4: ECD Programmes that Support Children's Holistic Development

According to Baloyi and Makhubele (2018), ECD centres must be monitored by a social worker or other official employed and authorised by the provincial DSD for two years. However, in ECD centres located in underprivileged contexts, this has not proved to be the case. The participants said:

We teach whatever we feel like teaching because some classrooms have children of different ages combined. So as a teacher, you look after 1-year-olds and 4-year-olds at the same time. How am I going to help these children if combined? (ECDC manager 1, KZN, rural)

No one comes to us to check whether what we are teaching is in line with the ECD curriculum. (ECDC manager 1, EC, rural)

Most children here are orphans, and others are coming from child-headed homes ... we do not get any support at all. (ECD manager 5, KZN, rural)

It is shocking that such ECD challenges are still prevalent approximately 20 years since the establishment of White Paper 5 in 2001. Nevertheless, 'the South African government has reiterated its commitment to implement social development programmes that are considerate of children's needs (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018, p. 10779). Data reveals that despite the South African government's commitment to ensuring that ECD programmes support young children's holistic development, the quality of much provision is still lacking (Atmore, 2013).

Implications for Practice

Successful implementation of a comprehensive ECD programme in ECD centres (affluent and underprivileged) demands collaboration amongst different stakeholders. The then DSD minister and the Cabinet agreed in 2015 to combine a range of services that contribute towards ensuring that infants and young children thrive; are healthy through good nutrition and food security; have access to social protection; have opportunities for early learning and development free from violence and abuse; and play and have fun amongst others. These were to be steps in the right direction towards addressing the ECD issues in South Africa (DSD, 2015). The government's obligation was to provide a comprehensive ECD programme and services including 'health care, food security and nutrition programmes', 'social protection programmes and parent support programmes', water, sanitation, refuse removal and energy sources, and 'play facilities, sport, and culture'. However, the rhetorical interrogation is how such interventions could be successful if there are indications that ECD centre managers' training programmes were not uniform across the contexts. As personnel tasked with policy implementation in their respective centres, ECD centre managers are obliged to understand the policy and its content. The achievement of the policy's goal depends solely on its effective implementation and synergy from all parties involved. A tough call for the involvement of different stakeholders is needed. Subsequently, the concerned departments have to train ECD centre managers continuously on the policy's expectations. To improve the quality and manage-

ment of comprehensive ECD programmes that focus on early learning and development, all national departments need to collaborate and ensure the involvement of all concerned as provided in the NIECDP, using the innovative and evaluative model.

Conclusion

The NIECDP's primary purpose to define a national comprehensive ECD programme and support with identified essential components inclusive of national, provincial, and local spheres of government was explored. We concluded that there were no means to provide comprehensive quality ECD programmes overarched by multisectoral bodies as per policy in most underprivileged ECD centres. Basically, ECD centre managers from these contexts worked in silos. Therefore, the lack of collaboration adversely affected children's holistic early learning and the delivery of quality ECD programmes. The quality ECD programmes that are associated with interactions and the provision of learning opportunities for all children's development is compromised. Therefore, ECD centre managers are expected to organise environments that embrace collaboration with all relevant stakeholders for the provision of comprehensive quality programmes.

Ethical Considerations

For ethical considerations, applications to conduct the research study were submitted to the relevant bodies. Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Fort Hare's higher degrees and research office and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Anonymity was assured with pseudonyms for the research sites and participants.

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