

CHAPTER 2

Early Childhood Leaders’ Conceptualisation and Understanding of Leadership in Community Centres The Case of South Africa

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Abstract

This chapter conceptualises leadership in early childhood care and education (ECEC) centres in South Africa. The report emanates from the Project in Early Childhood Policy Analysis (PECPA) research project conducted in ECEC community centres in the rural communities of Gauteng Province (RSA). Because of the minimal research conducted on centre managers’ conceptualisation of leadership in rural South African ECEC centres, the study aims to highlight the challenges, understanding, and practices of ECEC centre leaders. Five principals

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were purposively selected from five rural community settings in this qualitative case study. The school-based management theory and leadership principle, termed centre-based management, underpinned the chapter. The research lends itself to an exploratory qualitative data collection method through face-to-face semi-structured interviews to explore the phenomenon under study. Findings reveal that principals' conceptualisation and understanding of leadership practices focus on administrative duties that exclude distributive leadership. The conceptualisation of leadership is limited to performing managerial duties such as practitioner recruitment, fundraising, and centre resource development. The conclusion is that ECEC leadership and sustainable development of community centres urgently require well-trained, informed, visionary, experienced, and critical-thinking leaders.

Keywords: centre-based management, change, distributive leadership, early childhood education centre, leadership conceptualisation, teamwork

Introduction

The success of any educational organisation depends on leadership. Literature on early childhood care and education (ECEC) centre leaders' conceptualisation of leadership practices is minimal, especially in developing countries where ECEC is mainly in the hands of private service providers. Hence, this chapter aims to bridge this gap by systematically exploring the understanding of leadership in ECEC principals' rural communities. Fonsén and Soukainen (2020) suggest that leadership in an ECEC context is embedded in the pedagogical leaders' practices. Leaders establish a sense of purpose that unites people and inspires them to achieve their goals in a collaborative organisation. Fulfilling dreams takes time, patience, attention, vision, and strategy. Leadership involves vision, a good management style, relevant knowledge, people skills, organisational acumen, and self-development, yet most leaders learn on the job (Detsky, 2011). ECEC leaders must manage their centres even while these talents are under supervision. According to Ibrahim and Daniel (2019), leadership is motivating people to accomplish organisational goals, and leadership style is the only factor in success. Thus, this research examines early childhood leadership conceptualisation and understanding in South African community ECEC centres.

Delineating Leadership

Leadership is difficult to describe, as writers' perspectives and settings vary. Leadership depends on its history and environment. According to McCleskey (2014), research that adopts a single definition of leadership may fail if the term depends on the researcher's interest, challenge, or context. Leaders encourage people to achieve organisational objectives and execute transformative policies (Morgan, 2020). Although leadership ideas may be similar, ECEC leadership is crucial. The following subsections summarise the theoretical foundations concerning leadership principles at ECEC centres.

South African Early Childhood Context

South Africa has two Early Childhood Development (ECD) systems: one controlled by the province and supported by the government, and one autonomous and administered by private organisations or communities (DBE, 2015). After the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa (SA), jobless mothers and grandmothers in rural areas established ECD centres, addressing the government's call to make ECD accessible to all South African children (Modise, 2019b). The Departments of Social Development, Basic Education, and Health oversee SA's government-registered and government-funded ECD centres and ensure excellent practices and services in the ECD sector (Storkbeck & Moodley, 2011). Pre-Grade R programmes, which are from birth to four years, need ECEC centres to register with the Department of Social Development. As of April 2022, birth to four years was transferred to the Department of Basic Education, which exclusively registered for Grade R (a grade before year one of formal schooling) programmes. However, most Pre-Grade R or Grade RR ECD centres lack the necessary paperwork and employ unqualified staff (Atmore, van Niekerk, & Ashley-Cooper, 2012). Skilled and supportive caregivers and practitioners help children develop correctly (Modise, 2019a). In this chapter, the terms ECEC and ECD will be used interchangeably, as they refer to the same thing.

Conceptualising Leadership in Early Childhood Care and Education

Leadership in ECEC implies different responsibilities for different people within the ECEC environment, depending on the specific context. Thus, various countries refer to ECEC leaders differently based on their roles. For example, in South Africa, ECEC leaders are called principals. In countries such as Finland and Germany, among others, leaders may be the director, while some may refer to them as managers. Heikka and Hujala (2013) view leadership in ECEC as a holistic process involving the leader, the administration, and the personnel, and indirectly parents and everyone who influences ECEC practice. Stakeholders, particularly leaders and practitioners, need a shared vision and objectives to succeed. According to Douglass (2018), leadership in ECEC improves early care and education for everyone. Rodd (2012) sees leadership as a process and responsibility that requires attention to several roles, functions, and ways that are aligned with and promote commitment to shared values and vision. On the other hand, McCrea (2015) opines that ECEC leadership entails four positions: a team leader, a policy designer, a pedagogy creator, and a rights advocate. The above definitions of leadership are all inherent in a visionary leader of a team in the realisation of organisational goals in creating a sense of purpose.

Visions and shared visions encourage organisational, team, and individual change, according to Boyatzis, Rochford, and Taylor (2015). Hill and Turiano (2014) say this sense of purpose boosts professional commitment and stability. Visionary leadership helps people discover purpose and responsibility. Helping people understand ECEC leadership might motivate them. Thus, ECEC leaders must see leadership as a shared vision among all stakeholders. Notably, Boyatzis and Soler (2012) find that a shared vision generates lasting transformation that empowers team members and inspires new possibilities. To promote a unified vision, centre leaders must acquire specialised skills and talents. Similarly, Ahtiainen, Fonsén, and Kiuru (2021) see ECEC centre leaders as key players who must be capable of leading the pedagogy and curriculum work yet simultaneously basing their work on the distribution of responsibilities.

Leadership Skills and Practices

The principles of leadership skills and practices highlight that acquired knowledge abilities are significant aspects of becoming an effective leader. Therefore, strong adherence to the skills theory often demands considerable effort and resources devoted to leadership training and development (Wolinski, 2010). Leadership practices and strategies incorporate transformational, shared, collaborative, and distributed leadership. Transformational leadership is a relationship between leaders and followers based on mutual stimulation and the elevation of followers. Shared leadership allows team members to lead the group (Adelere, 2011), with Zhu, Liao, Yam, and Johnson (2018) expressing the view that leadership and a position of authority could be changed or shared and that knowledge, not power, should be prioritised.

Maalouf (2019) notes that collaborative leadership entails getting the right mentality, developing harmony, maintaining the capability to connect smoothly with others, and managing contradictions. De Witt (2017) explains that collaborative leadership includes the purposeful action leaders take to enhance the instruction of teachers to build deep and meaningful relationships with all stakeholders while learning together. This distributed perspective expands the leadership role beyond the centre manager and motivates individuals to contribute their expertise and skills in completing tasks and achieving goals (Torrance, 2013). Leadership is needed at all levels within an organisation and can be practised to an extent by a person not assigned to a formal leadership position (DuBrin, 2022).

According to DuBrin (2022), to understand a study one must understand the difference between leadership and management. DuBrin (2022) states that 'leadership is the capacity to inspire confidence and support among those essential to realising organisational objectives'. In addition, it involves a type of responsibility aimed at achieving particular ends by applying available resources (human and material) to ensure the operation of processes in an organisation (Ololube, 2013). Raymer's (2014) research asserts that the combined effects of leadership are a fundamental driving force for improving organisational performance. Leaders are thus managerial agents whose responsibility is to maintain a competitive edge (Karamat, 2013). In addition, to understand the effects of leadership on performance, ECEC centre leadership must play a key role in sharpening the organisation's performance

by introducing relevant, innovative strategies (Obiwuru, Okwu, Akpa, & Nwankwere, 2011). Collaborative leadership can be seen as an active exchange of ideas, opinions, and resources.

Centre-Based Management and Leadership Framework

This chapter adopts a school-based management and leadership approach to underpin its theoretical foundation. The principle and intention of centre-based management is to ensure that leaders in ECEC centres practise distributed leadership as experts prescribe. However, findings from most research studies indicate that principals, unfortunately, exclude the principle of distributive leadership. A study conducted by Wong and Fitzgerald (2022) found that school leaders should cultivate a distributed leadership culture. This implies that distributed leadership is neglected or excluded. Distributed leadership, according to Sonmez and Gokmenoglu (2022), increases teachers' support, critical consciousness, and inclusive behaviour. Distributed leadership, where all team members have the potential to lead through intentional practice, is increasingly seen as an effective leadership model (Denree & Thornton, 2021).

Research Methodology and Design

This study examines South African ECEC leaders' conceptualisation and understanding of leadership by addressing the following questions: What is leadership and management's understanding and conceptualisation of being a leader at an ECEC centre? How do leaders support practitioners? What are leaders' expectations in terms of effective centre management? Moreover, what do leaders want to change regarding ECEC centre leadership? This qualitative research study seeks local viewpoints on a research problem (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). Qualitative research reveals culturally distinct values, attitudes, behaviours, and social settings or contexts (*ibid.*). Five principals from rural communities answered qualitative, semi-structured research questions. Principals from a rural community and with over five years of ECD teaching experience were eligible. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), qualitative semi-structured interviews have a unique potential for eliciting information about the partici-

pants' lived experiences. In this study, the semi-structured interviews revealed principals' awareness of ECEC leadership and support for practitioners, their expectations for effective centre leadership, and their vision for ECEC leadership change. In addition, they allowed researchers to probe further for clarification purposes. South African Gauteng North District Department of Education ECD centres were the study's setting, with ECD centres located in rural Hammanskraal in north-western Gauteng Province.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through face-to-face focus group semi-structured interviews. The research employed thematic data analysis. According to Creswell (2012), comprehending textual and visual information is crucial to research-related answers. Categories, patterns, and themes were created from participants' data. The data were analysed before and after collection. The interview questions produced articles, and the primary data-containing transcripts were content-analysed to find responses that matched each article. Illustrative quotations supported data display and analysis. The data reached a saturation point when no new themes or ideas emerged. The collected data were analysed utilising Creswell's six processes: preparing and organising the data, exploring the data through coding, coding to develop description and themes, representing and reporting findings, interpreting the meaning of the findings, and validating the accuracy of the findings. Then, phrases were identified and grouped into themes using coding. Data were checked for overlaps during code labelling. The study report later categorised and used more significant, distinctive themes. To increase the accuracy and dependability of the findings, the focus was more on the overall image than on the immediate concept. The authors conducted the semi-structured interviews and included general research questions about their conceptualisation of leadership, for example:

What is your vision and understanding of management and leadership?

How do you support the practitioners?

What are your expectations for centre management and leadership?

What do you want to change concerning ECEC leadership? In other words, what do you want to do differently?

The themes that emerged from the participants' responses were: Theme 1: Uncertain Leadership; Theme 2: Support and Funding; Theme 3: Expectations for Centre Management and Leadership; Theme 4: Same policy advantages as Grade R; and lastly, what would they change?

Participant Demographics

ECD leaders and founders of community ECD centres participated in this study. Their centres accept six-month-olds to four-and-a-half-year-olds. Because they offer Grade RR and R programmes, they must register their ECD centres with the Departments of Social Development and Education. The centres are in rural South Africa. African women who spoke one of their local languages participated in the study. Some had ECEC diplomas in early childhood and some were unqualified founder principals. Their age range was from 30 to 58 years.

Ethical Considerations

The research examined ECEC leaders' concerns, attitudes, and tactics. This research forms part of the 'PECPA' where 11 universities were participating in the bigger Gauteng Department of Education project. The university hosting the administration of the project gave ethical approval for the study to be conducted. Participants were told they were participating in the study voluntarily and could withdraw at any moment if they felt they no longer wanted to continue participating. Research anonymity was guaranteed. To hide their identities, the participants were given ECEC centre numbers instead of names.

Findings

The four key questions examined how ECEC leaders conceptualised and understood leadership in the context of ECEC in South Africa. The following are the replies:

My vision is to see teachers who are independent, trained, and who become leaders. I must be open to them and not hide information so they can do what I do and be role models for this type of business through how I behave. (Principal 1)

Even though some principals were retired, other enthusiastic principals' ambition for ECEC leadership was to create more centres, which would change people's lives. Their goal was to positively improve the lives of young children by extending their humanitarian vision to the entire community. Their ECEC leadership allowed them to act as community social workers and role models. One principal said the following:

I was over-aged, and I could not do this, but to be an ECEC leader, I see more opportunities. I regard the ECEC centre as a business, and I am like a saint. I help women change their lives and encourage them to improve; others had lost hope as parents and faced challenges. (Principal 2)

Bringing love to education was another principal's vision for leadership, as shown in the passage below:

I understand and am thankful that having an ECD centre means education is essential. I have a love for children and parents. If you do not love the parents and the children, you cannot work well with them. Being a leader in ECEC means teaching your teachers to love children and to understand them. (Principal 3)

The government's funding of the centre was one of the leadership goals of one principal. She said the following:

My vision is to get funding from the government. You see, some people who work at the crèches are not educated, and some are single parents; they earn from R1500.00 a month. In R1500.00, they must pay their children's school funds, buy food, pay electricity and contribute towards the uniform to look beautiful. If I get funding, I will see to it that I pay my practitioners well. (Principal 5)

As influential leaders, they support practitioners and children financially in ECEC centres. They give practitioners more power and include them in decision-making to ensure healthy interpersonal relations. Although there are financial difficulties in isolated rural locations, the following forms of assistance are available, as suggested by Principals 4 and 5.

Concerning education, I support my teachers by finding institutions to learn from. Some practitioners are currently busy with National Qualifi-

cation Levels 4 and 5 at X Academic in the neighbouring village or community. We pay a certain amount for their education. Unfortunately, we need donors' help to raise funds. (Principal 4)

For practitioner shortages, we advertise vacancies. The teachers spread the word, and those interested send us their CVs. The committee shortlists candidates according to our requirements, and the shortlisted candidates come for interviews. (Principal 5)

Some ECEC centre managers help with resource development. For instance:

We use recycled materials like containers and bottles for teaching the water theme. We demonstrate things that sink and those that float. We ask for these things from parents during our committee meetings. For example, we also ask for old stoves, irons, and clothes to enact 'make-believe' lessons with them. (Principal 2)

Teachers accompany children to the bathroom, ensuring they have tissues and a towel. They provide water in a basin for children to wash their hands in the bathroom. I emphasise that they teach them the appropriate way of asking to use the bathroom and to be respectful. (Principal 4)

Some leaders explain to practitioners the Department of Education's stance on ECEC teachers. Consider this:

We follow a handwashing policy daily to protect teachers and learners from diseases. Teachers teach learners about infectious diseases and how to protect themselves. We have some children whose parents are HIV-positive, so teachers and learners need to know how to care for themselves. (Principal 1)

All the principals shared similar standards for treating centres and staff equally. Similar opinions are expressed in the following responses:

I expect all my centres to be like all other childcare centres worldwide. Not on how beautiful they look, but on the education our children receive. I would like to see professors or practitioners from my centre do our work. I expect my teachers to teach children so that when they leave here and go to other institutions like X and Y, they can proudly say they came from this centre having learned the right things. (Principal 4)

When asked what the government should be doing to help centres succeed, centre leaders responded as follows:

I would like the government to fund us, especially the Department of Education. We have Grade R children in our crèches who do not receive food, but the Grade R children in primary schools receive food. The Grade R classes in primary schools are the government's responsibility, but not in the community centres. (Principal 3)

Like many other principals, these principals are excluded from the Department of Education's funding because they did not register with the Department of Education and Social Development. Some reasons for their non-registration might be that they needed to meet the registration requirements in terms of the infrastructure: teachers employed at the centre, for example, foreigners without proper documentation, etc. As alluded to in the Department of Education meeting report on 3 March 2020, the Department of Social Development subsidy pays R15 per child for 264 days for registered ECEC centres. Unregistered centres should consider registering their centres to enable them to get subsidies.

The following was the response when asked who the Department of Social Development funds:

Birth to four years fall under the Department of Social Development and get funding. Children in Grade R in schools get funding because their curriculum falls under the DoE [Department of Education]. So, to address disparities in ECEC centres, the government encouraged community centres to establish Grade R classes for learners so that they do not have to travel or walk long distances to public schools. But then the centres must register with the Department of Education to be funded or to get food. (Principal 4)

The following was the response to the question on the qualifications of centre principals in comparison to foundation phase educators at government schools:

We are also qualified and have completed Grade R. We received training through government institutions as this is a government project, and payment has to be at the same level as teachers in schools starting in 2019. This is not an individual thing to fight for, it needs a group. (Principal 4)

This situation propels the qualified Grade R teachers to raise their voices regarding salary disparities despite their meeting the Department of Primary Education's qualification requirements.

The following responses came from the five principals regarding having a diploma qualification:

So I wish that the government would provide centre leaders and managers with the same benefits offered to public schools. We, as ECD centres, lay the foundation. Government intervention in terms of equal remuneration for teachers is significant. (Principal 1)

I would like to see centre leaders and staff appreciated and not taken for granted. They must appreciate us; they must uplift us most of the time. They should also offer us incentives; remember, they can take many forms. It can be through a certificate, money, or telling people how good we are. (Principal 2)

They must appreciate us because we are doing everything else other centres are doing. We are hired and work very hard, but the Grade R teachers get better treated than us. Department of Education offers bursaries, but we still need those bursaries as ECCE centres in communities. We also want to study, but we need more money. We also want to step up and move forward, but things pull us down, like a lack of money. Some of us are single parents. (Principal 3)

Teaching kids for me is not about money. I like kids very much. I am a hard worker, but the lack of appreciation sometimes demotivates us. You feel like the department does not take notice of us because they do not invite us to attend training. They say they want the public-school grade Rs only. We want to attend workshops that the department provides to improve our practice. (Principal 4)

The change that I would like to see as a manager is a government that takes care of my employees to make them happy and motivate them. It can be through money, it can be through gifts, and it can be by communicating. It is nice to be called into the office to be told that you did well. You feel appreciated. Joining the union to represent us will help. The government needs to hear our voices. (Principal 5)

Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that the ECD leaders understand their roles as leaders in the community centres as being those of compassion and providing financial support to the teachers. From the responses they provided, they present an unclear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. In the subsequent paragraphs, the authors present brief discussions of the four emerging themes from the principals' responses.

Uncertain Leadership

Most principals' comments revealed uncertain leadership positions because they interpreted vision, management, and leadership as compassionate acts of helping practitioners in the centres where a vision showed personal involvement. Their goal was to positively influence everyone's life and extend their leadership to the entire community to achieve this. Despite having divergent opinions, the principals' remarks on their conceptualisation for ECEC centre leadership focused on the support or aid given to practitioners because they desired to see practitioners gain independence, training, and leadership positions. In helping practitioners alter their lives and deal with issues, they saw their transparency and giving of information as that of a vision, leadership, and management role model for running a centre or launching other centres. Their concern about education and ECD centres needs to be viewed as a sign of their leadership and management vision.

Support and Funding

Most principals stressed the significance of offering financial assistance to practitioners and students in ECEC centres. Their support is emphasised in remarks where they claim that they only provide a small amount of financial aid because facilities in isolated rural locations receive little funding from the government. They need sponsors and help to raise money. By including practitioners in the decision-making process, they empower them. The ECEC principals' practices are aligned with distributed leadership practices, which De Witt (2017) explains as 'collaborative leadership' that includes the purposeful action leaders take to enhance the instruction of teachers and build

deep and meaningful relationships with them. As a result, their centres have friendly interpersonal relationships. They help by assisting practitioners to identify educational institutions, and some are currently engaged in further education. To get interested people to send their CVs when other centres need practitioners, they urge the practitioners to advertise by spreading the word.

Some ECEC centre leaders ask for old stoves, irons, and garments to stage 'make-believe' classes and provide recycled items like containers and bottles for instruction. Children can wash their hands after using the restroom with tissues, a towel, and water in a basin. Surprisingly, instead of talking about their roles, some shared their expectations regarding treatment and receiving funding from the government. This led to the third theme.

Expectations for Centre Management and Leadership

The principals anticipated receiving the same treatment as other schools worldwide, though not in terms of appearance, because the environment is different. However, in terms of financing and teaching, the principals expect that the government should have funded them even though they were not registered. For ECEC centres to be registered in South Africa, they must satisfy an excessive list of requirements, some of which may not be easily met in disadvantaged contexts (Blose & Muteweri, 2021). They also wanted the children to learn and to attend higher education institutions, and they acknowledged that for the centres to get funding or food, they must register with the Department of Education and the Department of Social Development. They expected to be paid on a par with schoolteachers, as some have the same qualifications in Grade R studies.

The Same Policy Advantages as Grades R

All principals wanted to be acknowledged and encouraged through workshops and training, and said they should be provided with incentives and scholarships to pursue additional education. If they perform well, they would like to know. They reasoned that if they joined the union, they might be able to be heard by the government, which needed to hear from them. They agreed that fair treatment is necessary from the government, given that ECD centres lay the groundwork. They

want the government to offer the same advantages and equal compensation instead of their being put down. They requested stationery and Grade R books for guiding infants to age four. Even though parents prefer that their children be educated in English, principals value the government for allowing them to use their mother tongue.

The recent migration of ECD in South Africa from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Education requires a more robust understanding of leadership roles by ECEC leaders. This increases the demand for competent centre leaders, necessitating a reconceptualisation of their practices and responsibilities (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). Of the framework of leadership practices addressed in this study—‘transformational, transactional, and distributed’—aspects specifically related to principals’ understanding and conceptualisation of ECEC leadership in ECEC communities emerged in a set of four themes in their responses.

From the responses to the four questions the principals were asked regarding their conceptualisation and understanding of leadership in ECEC centres, the authors came up with the four themes from the common aspects mentioned by the participants in their responses. The first theme on management’s vision and understanding of leadership skills for ECEC environments indicates that most principals who manage more than one centre have unclear leadership roles, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. However, teachers are aware that it is possible to make administrative decisions before getting the ‘go-ahead’ from the principal, as this will affect the performance of ECEC centres. Their belief is in line with Leithwood, Sun, and Pollock (2017) when they allude to the idea that principals’ leadership is critical in supporting students’ achievement. The sharing of leadership duties allows individuals to acquire knowledge and skills to uplift the centre’s performance (Torrance, 2013). Thus, distributed leadership may increase school capacity and crucial decision-making (Bush & Ng, 2019) and meet the state’s conflicting academic and human development goals.

The second theme of support and funding at ECEC centres highlights support through teacher study funding to enhance professional skills. The teachers enrol with established learning institutions to become informed practitioners (Raymer, 2014). This theme indicates that staff’s well-being increases all-round performance, improves job satisfaction, reduces absenteeism, and supports ECEC learners wholeheartedly. Minimal funds are a challenge practitioners face. It is com-

mendable to note that ECEC principals have not lost hope and continue to fundraise and provide financial support to teachers furthering their studies. This practice resonates with Tambe and Krishnan's (2000) notion of transformational leadership, where leaders and followers motivate each other and inspire people to pursue ultimate objectives and self-actualisation needs. The principals' support for teachers fits with the second part of transformational leadership theory, which emphasises that leaders are helping followers achieve their goals or are sharing resources (Mofokeng, 2022). The Department of Social Development should offer nutrition for Grade R children, according to the third theme on what principals expect from the government in funding ECEC centres. Funding from the relevant departments is critical in improving the management of ECEC centres in South Africa.

The 'brain drain' principals experience at their ECEC centres is the fifth and final theme concerning what they would change in their ECEC centres. With teachers holding the same qualifications as those with a diploma from a tertiary university, it is unacceptable that practitioners at ECEC centres receive unequal salaries and little government assistance. The ECEC practitioners depart from these facilities in search of better pay and other perks at places like government primary schools after obtaining a professional qualification (Modise, 2019b). Government salaries that vary for holders of the same qualifications are unfair.

Limitations

The sampling selection for this study restricted the selection of participants to ECEC leaders from only a single Department of Education district out of 15 districts in Gauteng province of South Africa, a single rural community, and a single province out of nine. As a result, the findings of this study were specific to these participants and this research setting. The sample should have included ECEC teachers to hear their conceptualisation and understanding of ECEC leadership. The transferability of the findings to other ECEC settings in South Africa may be limited. The different investigation methods could have influenced the participants' responses; the principals participated in one semi-structured focus group interview. Despite the limitations, this study gives a voice to principals in rural ECEC community centres.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study are not exhaustive but reflect the leadership practices of five ECEC principals in South Africa. These recommendations are built on the results of this study, which explored ECEC principals' conceptualisation and understanding of their roles as leaders.

An essential element of the success of ECEC centres is an understanding of leadership, so policy practices should address, support, and promote efficient leadership and management in ECEC sites.

In order to prevent brain drain, ECEC teachers must be paid competitively enough for them to stay in the field.

The government must fund community-based teachers and leaders in the ECEC sector and provide workshops and training so they can advance their careers and practices.

The ECEC principals should collaborate and work professionally with the ECEC teachers and implement a variety of leadership styles—such as distributive leadership—for a common goal.

ECEC teachers who lack qualifications should pursue ongoing training and development to regain their confidence in working at ECEC centres.

Conclusion

Since there is limited research on leadership practices in ECEC centres in South Africa, it would be beneficial if researchers conducted similar studies to find answers to centre managers' questions about leadership and management in ECEC centres. When ECEC teachers feel sidelined in decision-making, they will not develop a sense of belonging or ownership in relation to the centre and will feel demotivated and undervalued. Salary and performance are contentious issues in under-resourced ECEC centres, so the performance of learners in these centres is compromised. Principals should be able to choose a model of core leadership that can improve their leadership performance in the ECEC centres.

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