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¹University of PretoriaDOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v40.i2.9>

e-ISSN 2519-593X

Perspectives in Education

2022 40(2): 113-128

PUBLISHED:

08 June 2022

RECEIVED:

16 December 2021

ACCEPTED:

01 April 2022

Accessing resources that promote quality education for young children: Experience of early childhood development centres' principals

Abstract

Research has indicated that educational resources used at early childhood development (ECD) centres advance and enrich the developmental domains, health and wellbeing of young children. However, most ECD centres in South Africa seem to lack many educational resources that enhance quality early childhood care and education (ECCE). This study aimed to explore the experience of the ECD principals in accessing learning resources for their centre. A qualitative research approach that employed a multiple case study research design was utilised. Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews with four principals and four practitioners from the four selected ECD centres. The collected data were analysed thematically. This study was guided by Britto, Yoshikawa and Boller's (2011) framework as a theoretical base. The findings revealed that ECD centres only access resources from the users' fees charged and a stipend from the government, which seems insufficient to promote quality ECCE. This study recommends that ECD principals become proactive regarding effective management and leadership skills by engaging with internal and external environment opportunities to access learning resources effectively. This study further recommends that ECD principals be exposed to various seminars, workshops, symposiums and training where they can network with influencers and develop their leadership and relational abilities that will assist them in being creative when accessing learning resources.

Keywords: Learning resources, ECD centre principal, Funding, management and leadership, quality ECCE.

1. Introduction

According to research literature, early childhood care and education (ECCE):

improves physical and mental health and reduce reliance on the health system, enhances school readiness and related outcomes, such as improved enrolment, retention and academic performance and reduces high-risk behaviours like unsafe sex, substance abuse and criminal and violent activity (City of Cape Town, 2015:8).



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To achieve the benefits of ECCE, proper investment to secure appropriate learning resources in ECD programmes, and the proper use of resources are essential (Biersteker, 2012; Naudeau *et al.*, 2012). Hence, ECD centres need to access developmentally appropriate learning resources to enhance quality ECCE. This study focused on ECD centres that provide day-care and preschool services for children from birth to four years and how the principal of the centre accesses resources used in enhancing the quality of education and care offered at the centre. For example, resources used in the playground and playroom are often reported as “essential determinants of quality early childhood education” (The Polcyn & Gawrysiak, 2017: 86). The term “resources” is used in this study to refer to physical, material and human resources (infrastructure, learning materials, financial and human resources).

According to Cooper (2015), the supply of educational resources in the ECD learning environment has received little or no attention at the national and local levels in terms of policy and guidelines. In South Africa, policy such as the National Integrated Plan (NIP) identified a crucial need to increase the required resources of an ECD service for children below five years of age (UNICEF, 2005). It appears as if the situation had not changed when Richter *et al.* (2017), in their study echoed that ECD centres and services for children (birth to four years of age) lack human and material resources at regional, provincial and local/district levels due to a lack of funding. In line with the above statement, Leshoele (2016) stated that the levels of government funding and total investment in the ECD sector are poor. Kotzé (2015) has the same view, saying that inadequate investment in the early years of education could require more expensive and less effective intervention at a later stage of life. As a result, inadequate financial resources could impede ECD centre principals in accessing learning resources that are meant to improve the quality of education and care provided to young children.

Most ECD centres charge high user fees to acquire resources to offer quality education and care (Atmore, 2012). Due to their economic status, most parents could not afford to pay the fees charged by the ECD centres. For instance, in their study, Aina and Bipath (2022:10) state that “the township centres have fewer infrastructure resources that promote quality ECCE because of the dire socio-economic conditions of the parents”. The authors went on to say that many parents are unable to pay the fees, putting the centres in a position where they are unable to secure the important learning resources to promote effective ECCE, particularly in rural areas. The ECD centre principals in lower-income areas suffer as they cannot purchase the essential resources for quality service delivery at their centres. Hence, this article aimed to bring to light the experiences of ECD centre principals in four centres situated in Gauteng Province, South Africa (two in townships and two in rural areas) in accessing resources that would help them provide the quality education and care needed for the young children in their centres. The essence of involving the different centre locations is identifying different experiences regarding accessing resources. The main research question used to achieve this aim is “how do ECD principals access resources that promote quality ECCE”? The sub-research questions to explore and answer the main research question are (1) How do ECD principals source funding to purchase resources that promote quality ECCE? and (2) How do ECD principals approach parents and community members regarding accessing resources that could promote quality ECCE?

2. Literature review

2.1 *Early childhood care and education*

ECCE, an essential aspect of ECD, is defined as “services and programmes that provide care and developmentally appropriate educational stimulation for groups of young children in centres and the community, or home-based programmes” (Richter *et al.*, 2012:5). ECCE has recently gained popularity as mothers who traditionally took care of young children at home are busy working. Apart from mothers’ unavailability to care for their younger children during working hours, there is a global understanding regarding the benefits of ECCE to young children’s growth and development.

2.2 *Benefits of early childhood care and education*

ECCE is recognised globally as contributing quality to and having a progressive impact on the lives of children and society at large in the long run. Many reports in the literature from various research fields, including education, neuroscience, health and economics, show that early investment in human capital contributes meaningfully to the success of individuals and the development of the wider community (Davis, 2009; Kotze, 2015). This view is corroborated by the stated benefits of ECCE programmes, namely:

to improve physical and mental health and reduce reliance on the health system; enhance school readiness and related outcomes, such as improved enrolment, retention and academic performance; and reduce high-risk behaviours like unsafe sex, substance abuse and criminal and violent activity (City of Cape Town, 2015:8).

Heckman (2011) adds that investment in ECD for disadvantaged children below the age of five years helps reduce the achievement gap; reduces the need for special education; increases the likelihood of a healthier lifestyle, lowers the crime rate and reduces overall social costs. Attending ECD centres is an opportunity for poor children to access recent learning instruments that their parents cannot afford. ECCE is thus seen as the “great equaliser” for all young children in South Africa.

A well-resourced early childhood development centre is non-negotiable if early childhood development is to be realised to make an essential contribution to addressing poverty, inequality, and social exclusion (Richter & Samuels, 2018). To achieve the benefits of early childhood development education in children’s lives, the availability of developmentally appropriate resources for quality delivery at the ECD centres is most important.

2.3 *Quality Early Childhood Care and Education*

There has been scholarly debate on how to give an appropriate description of quality ECCE. However, it has been found that for an ECD centre to have a permanent, positive benefit for children’s development and learning, the notion of quality is essential to ensure healthier young children with improved cognitive and socio-emotional abilities (Paulsell *et al.*, 2010). Hence, quality ECCE is mainly determined by the presence of the structural and process quality input such as physical infrastructure. This infrastructure includes the toilet and bathroom facilities, the academic programme, the number of children and teachers, the size of classes and the ratio of learners to educators, the availability of suitable, age-appropriate education equipment, material and resources; good governance and financial management (Atmore, 2019; Bonetti & Brown, 2018). Structural quality is an input that is easily observed and measurable in determining quality such as ECD centre facilities or resources, ECD

practitioner to child ratios and ECD practitioner qualifications, training and wages (Bonetti & Brown, 2018; Slot *et al.*, 2015). Ishimine and Tayler (2014) described process quality as the nature of interactions between the children and teachers, among children, and among adults, teachers, parents, staff, and the nature of leadership and pedagogy. These identified structural and process inputs that determine quality ECCE could be described as the essential resources that should be available and adequately used at ECD centres.

2.4 Resources in Early Childhood Development Centres

Resources in ECD centres include human, material and non-material resources used to deliver learning, such as furniture, toys, equipment, space, lighting, practitioners' skills, administrative and leadership quality (Aina & Bipath, 2022). Relevant and appropriate resources used in the playground and playroom are often reported as an essential determinant of quality early childhood education (Polcyn & Gawrysiak, 2017: 86). According to Tseng and Seidman (2007) as well as Britto *et al.* (2011), resources include physical, material and human capital. Tseng and Seidman (2007: 222) use the term physical resources as "the availability and quality of curricular materials, space, facilities, and buildings". Material resources comprise the availability of clean water, healthy meals and snacks, quality teaching and learning materials (Britto *et al.*, 2011). Human resources could be referred to as the level of education provided for the teachers and staff (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). In this article, resources in the ECD centre include infrastructure (outdoor and indoor space, toilet and kitchen facilities); equipment and learning materials; and human resources (practitioners' qualification and training).

Several authors recognised infrastructure resources at the ECD centres as the buildings, space, lighting, ventilation, learning equipment, clean drinking water access; toilets, schools with no safety hazards but with protective measures, a clean physical environment, sufficient classroom space for sitting, moving about and doing activities, and ample available outdoor playground (Bonetti & Brown, 2018; Chopra, 2016; Peisner-Feinberg & Yazejian, 2010). Atmore (2013: 156) discovered that several ECD centres were functioning "without basic infrastructure such as running water, access to electricity or suitable sanitation. They sometimes also lacked adequate fencing of the premises and separate areas to prepare food". Similarly, in the research conducted by Mbarathi *et al.* (2016), which focused on ECD centres within informal settlements of urban areas, it was discovered that the infrastructure in ECD centres was indigent. This finding indicates that some ECD centres had the necessary infrastructure resources to promote quality ECCE. Equally, in her study, de Witt (2010) discovered that ECD centres in low-income communities lacked essential resources for teaching, such as storybooks, toys, clay, blocks, play dough, plastic animals, puzzles, dress-up materials and furniture.

2.5 Accessing resources in ECD centres

Globally, early childhood development centres are challenged by a lack of funds or inappropriate funding to provide the necessary resources required for quality delivery at the early childhood development centres (Atmore, 2012; Leshoele, 2016). Polcyn and Gawrysiak (2017:88) affirm that "school resources are limited by the funds available to a given school". Funding is the medium of exchange for purchasing the resources, both material and human, needed to provide quality learning at the early childhood development centres (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2014). Put another way, a lack of funds would prevent the centre principal from acquiring the necessary resources, such as instructional material or employing qualified personnel.

There are two primary funding sources for early childhood education: government and private funding (Belfield, 2007). The government, through its agencies, makes provision for funding for early childhood education, while the private funding of ECD comes mostly from parents through the payment of fees. Non-governmental organisations, such as churches, charities and companies, fund ECD centres through donations and community members assist with funding as a form of social responsibility. According to Viviers, Biersteker and Moruane (2013), in South Africa, there is no clear legal obligation for the government to fund ECD programmes for children below the age of five years. Belfield (2007), on the one hand, note that government funding, however, can be a significant source of funds for ECD, mostly for families with low incomes who cannot afford to pay the fees charged by centres. On the other hand, Atmore (2012) argues that a substantial part of ECD centre funding nationwide is from parents who pay fees.

The primary means of financial provisioning at ECD centres are fees charged to parents. Fees are charged to fund resources such as purchasing teaching and learning materials, employing and retaining qualified staff, and providing infrastructure that promotes quality learning at the centre.

ECD centre principals charge high user fees to make needed resources available for quality service delivery at the centre. However, many families do not have the financial resources to pay for ECD services because of poverty (Atmore, 2012). A lack of financial resources will invariably affect the acquisition of learning resources at the centre (Aina & Bipath, 2022; Biersteker *et al.*, 2016). As a result, the principal will face a big challenge due to a lack of financial means to obtain appropriate resources that enhance quality ECCE. For example, the principal will have to deal with issues such as poor infrastructure, inadequate play equipment, unavailability of learning materials and toys, and the presence of unmotivated practitioners due to low wages and salaries.

2.6 Roles of ECD centre principals in accessing resources

Britto *et al.* (2011) emphasise that ECD centres may not necessarily be able to provide all the quality indicators (resources) privately but should get support from the ecological system around them. This sourcing becomes the responsibility of the ECD principal, being the one who directs and controls the centre's activities. The principal is expected to develop strategies in accessing learning resources at an affordable rate or as donations from their immediate or external environment. According to Britto *et al.* (2011), a framework on the ecological systems level with cross-cutting quality dimensions signifies that ECD centres do not have to rely on their internally generated resources but should access resources from their immediate and external ecological environment such as parents, community members, government agencies, private organisations, NGOs and international communities. For the principals to connect and access resources from their immediate and external environment, they will need practical leadership skills (Britto *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, the ECD principal's role in accessing resources can be stated as follows: to predict how resources can be accessed, to create conducive working conditions and policies on how to access resources, to create awareness of the centre to raise funds, to create and manage local support networks within their immediate environment, and to build good communication and relationships with the relevant stakeholders such as parents, community members, non-profit organisations and business owners, especially those that sell learning resources for ECD centres and international organisations.

3. Conceptual framework

This section aims to describe the roles of ECD principals in accessing resources concerning the framework for ecological and systems-levels settings and cross-cutting quality dimensions (Britto *et al.*, 2011). This framework is appropriate because it looks into features that will enhance access and quality in ECCE programmes. For example, Britto *et al.* (2011) assert that accessibility and quality characteristics must be discussed higher than the environmental system level to facilitate sustainable and meaningful progress in ECCE programmes in developing countries.

The framework (see Figure 1) for ecological and systems-levels settings and cross-cutting quality dimensions used by Britto *et al.* (2011) focuses on promoting ECCE programmes and the maintenance of quality. Britto *et al.* (2011) facilitated the incorporation of ecological system rates with efficient cross-cutting dimensions. The level of ecological systems is split into two settings and systems, and five dimensions of quality that cut across and affects the system at different levels. This framework was chosen because it examines elements that will improve access and quality in ECCE programmes, specifically in the South African context. For example, Britto *et al.* (2011) argue that accessibility and quality attributes must be articulated at a higher than the environmental system to allow long-term and meaningful success in ECCE programmes in underdeveloped countries. Figure 1 depicts where to seek support for the resources that guided this research.

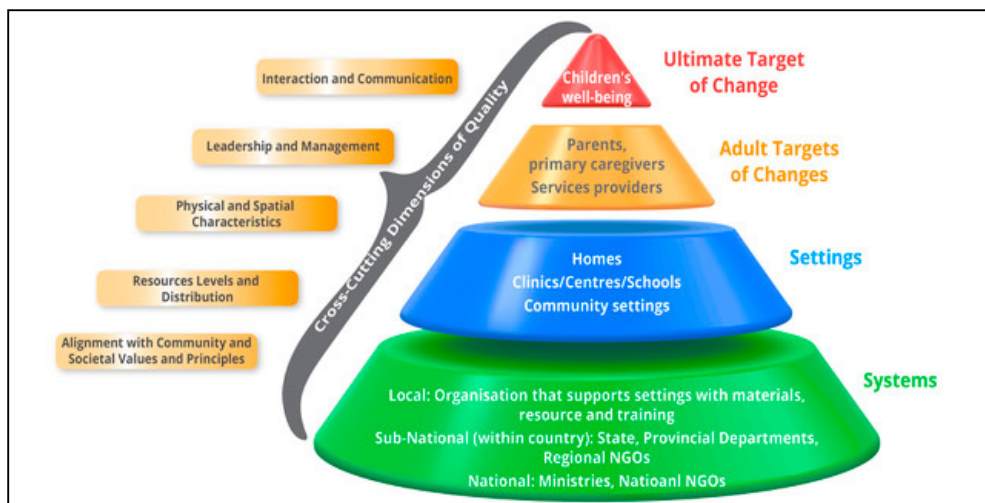


Figure 1: Ecological settings and systems levels and cross-cutting quality dimensions (Britto *et al.*, 2011:10).

3.1 The ecological system

Britto *et al.* (2011:10) advocate the “integration of ecological systems levels with cross-cutting quality dimensions” as depicted in Figure 1, show five cross-cutting dimensions of quality (interaction and communication, leadership and management, physical and spatial characteristics, resource levels and distribution, and alignment with community, societal values, and principles) in conjunction with the pyramid of ecological levels and systems. The environments with adults and children on the right-hand side of the pyramid determines the delivery of the desired outcomes, that is, quality ECCE, for young children. The set of levels

of the ecological systems “is divided into [two] settings and systems, and five dimensions of quality which cut across and impact the system at different levels” (Britto *et al.*, 2011:10). The settings and systems are explained below.

3.2 Setting and system

Quality is usually conceptualised at the programme or the setting level. Conceptualisation settings are defined as areas of physical activity within which ECD services are executed (Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Settings are “physically and temporarily bound spaces in which groups of people or members of target populations and interventionists interact” (Britto *et al.*, 2011:10). Such ECCE settings could include formal or informal community-based programmes such as ECD centres. Generally, quality ECCE is determined by resources in terms of structure and process such as infrastructure, space, learning materials, staff-child ratios, qualifications and compensation of practitioners as well as processes such as instruction quality, and aspects of practitioner-children and children-children interaction indicators in the ECCE setting (Bonetti & Brown, 2018; Excell, 2016; Woodhead, 1996). Britto *et al.* (2011) suggest that a comprehensive view of quality ECCE should include ecological standards outside the environments to a broader systems level. Britto *et al.* (2011) imply that the ECD centres should not mainly depend on the resources from their settings to promote quality ECCE, but also attempt to access support from the ecological systems around them. For example, there should be active and accessible support systems from their immediate community at the regional, provincial, national and international levels.

Britto *et al.* (2011) define systems as the larger organisational and institutional structures within which there are ECD centres. Three layers define the structures: “local support systems, sub-national systems, and national systems” (La Paro, Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Local support networks evolve from the settings level to provide direct assistance and training to each programme’s site. Examples are “local supply channels for material resources (e.g., cash and food), local delivery systems (such as local health centres that provide health services to ECD programmes), and training and support structures (providing supervision and training for site-level service providers)” (Britto *et al.*, 2011: 12). Support systems may be based on non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The sub-national systems level is described as support from regions within the country, state, province, city or municipal levels. At the level of national structures, national agencies such as the ministries of Finance, Education or Health, and national and international NGOs or for-profit organisations may provide unique funding for ECCE programmes. In relation to this section, it implies that the ECD centres should not depend primarily on the resources from their settings to promote quality ECCE, but also attempt to access support from the ecological systems around them. For example, there should be active and accessible support systems from their immediate community at the regional, provincial, national and international levels. Such a support system could be interpreted in terms of ongoing training to the ECD practitioners and staff as well as the provision of materials and other learning resources.

4. Methodology

The interpretive paradigm was chosen for this study because it makes it easier to comprehend and describe the event under exploration (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The interpretive paradigm, for example, revealed a lot about the participants’ experiences with accessing resources in their centres (Ferreira, 2012). A qualitative research approach was utilised to acquire first-hand knowledge in the research setting (Neuman, 2011) and interpret and comprehend

the participants' experiences accessing resources to meet the study objectives. A multiple case study research design was adopted through the selected sample of four registered ECD centres, two from the township areas and two from the suburban areas of Pretoria, Gauteng Province, South Africa. Multiple case studies allow selecting several cases, which is advantageous because it highlights variations between multiple cases (Crowe *et al.*, 2011).

Face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews were used to generate data from eight purposively selected participants from the participating registered ECD centres. Purposeful sampling involves "selecting participants with fundamental knowledge or information related to the study's purpose" (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010), hence its adoption in this study. A semi-structured interview schedule was employed with pre-structured questions to elicit pertinent responses to answer the research questions. The participants comprised four ECD centre principals and four practitioners. The essence of involving practitioners in the interview sessions are to understand their experiences regarding accessing learning resources. The criteria for selecting participants were that they were expected to have at least three years job experience in their present post. Their level of experience and knowledge was expected to enable effective answering of the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview sessions were audio-recorded to capture the conversation verbatim and to offer information for validity checks as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2014). Field notes were taken to capture the body language of the participants. Table 1 shows the participants' profiles.

Table 1: Profile of the sites and participants

Centre location	Fees per child per month	Participant code	Position	Age/gender	Years of experience
Township 1	R450	PT1	principal	32/female	4 – in current centre
		PT2	practitioner	42/female	4 – in current centre
Township 2	R400	PT3	principal	36/female	5 – in current centre
		PT4	practitioner	30/female	6 – in current centre
Suburban 1	R2300	PS5	principal	61/female	14 – in other centres; 25 – in current centre
		PS6	practitioner	61/female	18 – in another centre; 12 – in current centre
Suburban 2	R1350	PS7	principal	46/female	6 – in another centre; 3 – in current centre
		PS8	practitioner	29/female	6 – in another centre; 1 – in current centre

The data analysis was done thematically through transcribing the data and familiarising ourselves with the data; codes were generated, after which sub-themes were formulated; themes were then established guided by the research questions and the theoretical framework. The purpose of analysing the data thematically was to identify significant themes and provide answers to the phenomena under study (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Ethical principles were observed by initially obtaining clearance to conduct research from the relevant bodies – The University ethics committee (clearance number – EC 18/11/02) and the Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province, South Africa. Before collecting the data, the participants were informed about the study's purpose and their rights to withdraw from the study at any

point in time (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Member-checking (Nieuwenhuis, 2016) was used to ensure the study's trustworthiness by returning the transcribed data to the participants and asking them to indicate whether the data accurately reflected their actual responses during the interview sessions. Pseudonyms/codes were used to conceal the participants' true identities and ensure non-disclosure of information about the ECD centres and the participants (Yin, 2016).

5. Findings and discussion

This section depicts the findings and discussion derived from the interpretative analysis of the data generated. The participants were asked questions to provide answers to the research questions, such as how they sourced funds to purchase learning resources and pay salaries, how principals related with parents and community members to access learning resources, and which tools were used in communicating and relating with the community members to seek support regarding learning resources. The sub-themes that emerged were insufficient sources of funds to acquire resources for the day to day running of the centre and relationship with the parents and community members to access resources. Table 2 depicts the emerged themes.

Table 2: Emerged themes

Codes and categories	Sub-themes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government funding • Users fees • System for fees collection 	Insufficient sources of funds to acquire resources for the day to day running of the centre	Financial challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication book • WhatsApp • Principals' forum • Parents' meeting 	Relationship with the parents and community members to access resources	Lack of involvement from parents and community members

5.1 Financial challenges

Financial resources are at the root of achieving any worthwhile goal, including quality ECCE. The participants' descriptions of sources of funding are discussed below. The participating registered ECD centres acquire funds mainly from the parents' payment of school fees and some financial support from the government. Whereas township centres received financial assistance from the government, the data revealed that suburban centres received no such assistance. The interview question posted to the participants to generate this data was: "Describe how you access funds to purchase learning resources to improve the quality of care and education offered in your centre?" The participants responded as follows:

TP1: The DSD gives stipends for food and also subsidises our salaries.

TP3: Government funding is usually allocated yearly. I usually submit our papers in terms of the Constitution, and they give us money quarterly, which provides for salary increases, food, educational equipment and materials.

TP4: The centre got funding from the DSD, but sometimes if the money comes in late it affects our salary payment.

The responses from the township participants indicate that they received money from the government to augment the payment of salaries, buy food, educational equipment and material. TP3, in her statement, indicates that it is the principal's responsibility to submit paper documents to the government before funds will be allocated. It was also mentioned that when the money from the government comes in late, it causes a delay in the payment of staff salaries. This response indicates that the staff members are well aware and informed regarding the centre's financial position. This funding from the provincial government confirms the suggestion by Britto *et al.* (2011) that provincial departments should fund ECD centres. However, the suburban centres do not enjoy any form of financial support from the provincial departments of DSD. The suburban participants responded as follows:

PS5: We do not get any form of financial support or assistance from the government.

PS7: Our source of income is through fee payments from the parents, no financial support from the government.

The suburban centres have different experiences regarding government financial support, even though they are registered with the Department of Social Development (DSD). It is important to know about other means of sourcing funds to access learning resources at the suburban centres. Although the township registered ECD centres in this study obtain some financial assistance from the government, this is inadequate as they are still unable to acquire the necessary teaching and learning resources that promote quality ECCE. Refer to the township statements below:

TP2: We do not have enough equipment outside. For example, like the sandpit we do not have, this also helps the young children to develop motor skills by using a spade to scoop sand into the bucket, but this we don't have.

TP1: For birth to three years children, we don't have playing equipment for them at the playground.

TP4: Uh-hmm, regarding equipment and toys, if we have more, it will be better, as they improve the learning outcomes.

Having adequate play equipment is recognised as one of the positive structural inputs that promotes quality ECCE (Fenech, 2011; Woodhead, 1996). The data collected revealed that the ECD centres located in the townships do not have sufficient play equipment, especially for young children from birth to three years of age (as indicated in their responses above). This finding suggests that apart from getting financial support from the government, the ECD centres' principals should develop effective management and leadership skills to enable them to access other funding sources from their immediate and external environments. This action is described in the ecological systems framework as support from the local (organisations that support settings with learning materials, resources and training), sub-national and national levels (Britto *et al.*, 2011).

The information (Table 1) showed that all participating centres charged fees, although there is a considerable difference between the fees charged in the township and suburban centres. The differences in the fee structure are aligned to the parents' socio-economic status. The gap in fee structures was reflected in the affluent suburban centres; centre C charged R 2 300.00 per month, and centre D charged R1 350.00 per month. Thus, the affluent parents registered their children in well-equipped centres and paid high fees, which they find

affordable since they get value for money. This further deepens the gap in access to high-quality ECCE because most parents cannot afford to send their young children to centres that charge fees they cannot pay. Therefore, ECD centre principals/managers (especially centres in less privileged areas) need to develop other avenues of accessing resources that would enable them to offer quality care and education to young children.

5.2 Involvement/lack of involvement of parents and community members

The centre personnel must communicate harmoniously and interactively on an ongoing basis with parents and other community members to obtain their cooperation, thus involving them gainfully in the centre's activities. This involvement has been recognised as a way of improving quality learning. According to Woodhead (1996), the relationship among adults in early childhood settings is identified as one of the quality indicators in ECD centres. For instance, the centre's principal must regularly connect with parents and other community members harmonically and engagingly to acquire their cooperation and involve them effectively in the centre's activities. Community involvement is also essential to access the necessary support from community members, which could lead to connecting with private organisations, NGOs and international communities to upgrade facilities (and thus performances) as suggested by the ecology system of Britto *et al.* (2011). The following are the experiences of the participants regarding tools used to create sound relationships with the parents and community members to involve them:

TP1: Through our communication books, we tell parents about their children and also about the needs of the centre.

TP3: We use communication books, and sometime I meet one-on-one with parents to support the centre regarding particular needs.

TP4: We have notice board outside the office where we put information on events on fund raising and also learning materials needed by the centre.

The affluent suburban centres appear to use social media such as WhatsApp, which is a quicker and easier way of passing information onto the parents. This approach was narrated as follows:

SPr5CC: Each practitioner also has a WhatsApp group with all the parents in her class, so we communicate that way and follow up with parents, particularly the parents that promised to donate used toys or learning materials.

SPr7CD: We have a WhatsApp group for the parents per class. All my parents are on this class WhatsApp group; we make general announcement on how parents can support the centre to improve the quality of services given to their children.

The township centres access community engagement through the ECD principals' forum. The following descriptions were given:

TP1: The ECD principals' forums meet to discuss the kids, policies, practitioners and how to pay them. They also help in communication with the community members on how to get support.

P3: The principals' forum is a platform for principals. They deal with early childhood development education issues, and they meet to discuss a way forward on how to improve their individual centres. All the principals and centre managers attend the meetings.

TP3 continued:

From the principals' forum, we do get information regarding workshops, training sessions and seminars. Normally, the ECD principals' forum comes up with information, and they communicate with the community who bring relevant information to us on how they can support us.

The suburban centres have a variety of mechanisms of relating and involving their immediate community compared to the township centres. The suburban participants explained how they collaborate with their immediate environment as follows:

PS5: We use our Facebook page to communicate to the larger community. We do outreaches; for example, during last year's "Madiba Day", we distributed materials and cleaned the environment. During these activities, people walking around ask us questions, and we tell them who we are and what our needs are. We also involve the community by connecting with organisations around us. These organisations also sponsor us sometimes by donating food and learning materials because they feel it's a good cause.

PS7: We are on the WhatsApp group of the street; they know we are here, and we invite them to our open-day programmes, and we also let them know how they can help the young children in the centre through their donations. We also organise concerts to advertise the centre and also get funds. There are businesses along the streets, and they know we are here.

This theme helped to understand how the ECD centres collaborate through the relational skills of the principal with parents and community members to access resources. The data showed that the participants used message books, WhatsApp, and parents' meetings to communicate and involve adults in their learning environment. The township centres access resources from their community through ECD principals' forums, which comprised ECD centre owners and principals. Through the principals' forum, they could communicate with the community and accessed support in terms of acquiring learning materials and training from the community. The suburban centres did not have a principals' forum, but they had effective channels of relating to and involving their community. The suburban centres collaborated with the immediate community through community projects, outreaches, concerts, street advertising, WhatsApp groups, and the businesses in the community.

Regrettably, none of the centres related to or involved their external environments as suggested in the ecological systems levels and cross-cutting quality dimensions of Britto *et al.* (2011). This implies that the township and suburban participating centres only drew on resources from the immediate environment, which is inadequate to promote quality ECCE. The findings revealed that the roles of the participating ECD principals regarding accessing resources were inadequate as they could not access resources from the external environment as emphasised by Britto *et al.*'s (2011) framework. As a result, recommendations for ECD centre principals are given in the section below on how to connect and access learning materials in the immediate and external environment to improve the quality of care and education delivered in ECD centres.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This article aimed to describe the experiences of ECD centre principals regarding accessing resources that promote quality ECCE. Britto *et al.*'s (2011) framework on ecological levels was used to understand and describe the experiences of the ECD centre principals in accessing resources that promote quality ECCE. As recommended in the framework that guided this study, to effect sustainable and meaningful change in ECCE programmes in developing countries such as South Africa, features of access and quality (resources) must be addressed at each level of the ecological system. For example, ECD centres should develop strategies for getting resources/support from their immediate and external environments. Achieving this task (accessing learning support from immediate and external environments) would only be possible if the ECD centre principal/manager possessed effective and efficient management/leadership abilities, a strong will and displayed active emotional intelligence. Their management/leadership abilities must include flexibility, creativity, social skills, problem-solving skills, integrity, maintaining a good attitude, sound communication skills and being a visionary. These attributes assist with harmonising the immediate and external environments of ECD centres.

Further recommendations include that ECD centre principals should also enrol for and attend national and international seminars, symposiums, conferences and workshops to meet and collaborate with their contemporaries. Departments of education could create platforms for ECD centre principals to be exposed to various avenues to develop their leadership capabilities, especially the ability to connect and involve their immediate and external environment. The principals and practitioners should engage in partnerships with parents regarding the growth and development of young children. ECD centres could be proactive and collaborate with their community through other community initiative programmes such as centre concerts, centre outreach programmes and ECD centre engagement in community projects to make their needs in terms of learning resources known.

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