




# Education and training experiences of early childhood care and education practitioners in rural and urban settings of Durban, South Africa

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**Background:** The education and training experiences of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners reflect gaps and inequalities in South Africa's educational system. Most South African ECCE centre practitioners do not have the appropriate qualifications to provide quality education to young learners.

**Aim:** The study aimed to explore how the education and training experiences of ECCE practitioners impact their professional identity in urban and rural settings in KwaZulu-Natal province and to develop a model that would enhance the education and training of ECCE practitioners.

**Setting:** Ten participants were selected for this study: one centre head and four practitioners from a rural setting, and one centre head and four practitioners from an urban area.

**Methods:** Wenger's social theory of learning was used to obtain an in-depth understanding of ECCE practitioners' education and training experiences and how they function as professional workers. An interpretative, qualitative case study was adopted. Data was collected through focus group semi-structured interviews and non-participants' observation and then analysed thematically.

**Results:** The findings revealed that practitioners in rural settings had to contend with unfair working conditions daily, working all day in challenging circumstances whilst earning low incomes. Urban practitioners worked reasonable hours and received living wages, although they also experienced challenges such as a lack of parental involvement, lack of transport for children and high rates of absenteeism.

**Conclusion:** Inequalities between rural and urban practitioners existed concerning resources, salaries, working conditions and further study and professional growth opportunities. Ensuring that practitioners attain proper Early Childhood Care (ECC) qualifications will raise the profession's esteem amongst wider communities.

**Keywords:** early childhood care and education; practitioner's qualifications and training; professional identity; rural and urban settings; Child Care practitioners; Early Childhood Development.

## Introduction

A priority for the South African government is to increase access to Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes for all children, especially the young children growing up in conditions of abject poverty and neglect (Department of Education [DoE], 2001a). The education system requires appropriately qualified practitioners in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) domain to meet this demand. There is, however, an alarming shortage of well-qualified practitioners in ECCE centres. For this reason, the Department of Higher Education and Training (2017) developed its policy on 'Minimum Requirements for Programmes leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators' (MRQECCE). This policy outlines a set of minimum qualifications for ECD educators interested in delivering ECD programmes. This study focused on the perception of ECCE practitioners regarding their qualifications and training in the field.

The training and education experiences of ECCE practitioners reveal the existing gaps in South Africa's educational system. Motsepe (2015) reports that there are 272 000 practitioners in South Africa, of which only 95 000 practitioners have earned the relevant qualifications and training experiences. This means that 177 000 practitioners lack those qualifications and

training experiences. Also, 2.7 million children attend preschools in South Africa, whilst 3 000 000 do not attend preschools. Bipath and Joubert (2016) agree that the lack of qualified practitioners in South Africa causes an ongoing crisis. This crisis creates significant challenges in the South African education system because children who do not develop holistically during their early childhood years will lack basic life skills and competencies in later years.

Several published studies on ECCE (Atmore 2013; Dawes et al. 2018) have indicated the importance of appropriately qualified educators in the formative years of young children. Young children need to be physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually stimulated. Unfortunately, too many practitioners employed in ECD centres do not possess the knowledge and skills to teach these young learners. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of ECCE practitioners' education and training and how these impact the delivery of their responsibilities as professionals in rural and urban settings of KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. The objectives of the study were as follows: to understand how the ECCE practitioners perceived their education and training experiences, to explore why it is important for ECCE practitioners to be qualified practitioners, to identify the challenges faced by ECCE practitioners regarding their education and training to work with young children and to suggest a model to improve ECCE practitioners' education and training. The researchers used the following research questions to explore and achieve the study's objectives:

- how do the ECCE practitioners in rural and urban settings in KwaZulu-Natal perceive their education and training experiences in performing their professional duties?
- what challenges do ECCE practitioners face in terms of their education and training that may affect their ability to work with young children?
- what support is required to improve ECCE practitioners' education and training?

### Early childhood care and education practitioners' qualifications in South Africa

South African national policies have prompted significant commitments to address the quality of ECCE programmes, which influenced the practitioners and their perceptions of professional work (Wooden 2002). The South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) (2007) offers many recognised qualifications for ECCE practitioners, particularly those who deal directly with children. South African Qualification Authority also offers community development qualifications for ECD experts to meet the needs of individuals who work directly with parents. All National Qualifications Framework (NQF)-registered qualifications and unit standards are structured according to learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria (Wooden 2002). South African Qualification Authority created qualifications in line with the NQF. Several ECCE training facilities exist today, managed by universities, further education and training (FET) centres and non-profit organisations (NGO), all of which provide qualifications. Institutions that provide qualifications must be accredited by

the Education Training and Development, Practices-Sector, Education and Training Authority (ETDP-SETA).

A significant problem in South Africa is that numerous practitioners with little education, few training experiences and sometimes no qualifications are employed, which affect the delivery of their professional duties. Van Zyl (2011) mentions that many practitioners are poorly trained or have received no professional training at all. Centres employ practitioners who have little qualification and few training experiences. Landsberg, Krüger and Nel (eds. 2005) argue that ECCE practitioners require well-planned intensive training and in-service training by competent and experienced people to address the diverse needs of children and improve the standards of education. The question that should come to mind is why South African ECCE practitioners are poorly trained or have no professional training despite the several professional development and training structures put in place by the government. Could it result from how practitioners perceive their education and professional development? In light of this question, it is imperative to explore how ECCE practitioners view their education and training and how they affect their roles as professionals.

### Professional identity of early childhood care and education practitioners

A good professional identity, according to Richter, Brunner and Richter (2021), enhances job satisfaction, self-efficacy, dedication and motivation. Many studies regarding professional identity agree on four central assumptions, namely, (1) that professional identity includes knowledge contraction and meaning, (2) that it is shaped through relationships, (3) that it is affected by context and (4) that it is unstable and shifting (Cardoso, 2014; Izadinia 2013; Tomlinson & Jackson 2021). These assumptions are directly associated with the four components of Wenger's (2009) social theory of learning: (1) experience can enhance an individual's ability through the combination of a meaningful life and the world we inhabit, (2) shared practices and collaboratively used historical and social resources can achieve common goals, (3) community involvement as evidence of competencies, and (4) education can change a person's professional identity. A definite sense of professional identity for ECCE practitioners can assist in ongoing staff recruitment and reduce the high turnover rates of beginner practitioners. Tomlinson and Jackson (2021) argue that the essence of a practitioner's professional identity is influenced by cultural, political, economic and social factors. Therefore, it is important to understand what informed the professional identity of ECCE practitioners as this understanding could help them redirect how they perceive their education and training experiences and how they care for and educate young children.

### Perceptions of early childhood care and education practitioners on their education and training

The establishment of the pedagogical work of practitioners in ECCE services contributed to the formation of stronger

perceptions of practitioners' professional identity (Alvestad, Duncan & Berge 2009). Practitioners' perceptions of their professionalism are multi-dimensional, complicated and cannot be reduced to a list of personal traits, responsibilities and obligations (Lightfoot & Frost 2015). According to Androusou and Tsafos (2018), practitioners' professional perceptions are influenced by their professional experience as well as dominant views regarding early childhood education. Moreover, Osgood (2012) argues that to encourage ECCE practitioners in developing a greater sense of professionalism through pedagogical programmes, they need to build a sense of professionalism from within themselves. She also suggests that universities and training providers should consider techniques that go beyond mere instruction and adopt programmes that prompt competent technicians to become more emotionally involved and able to critically reflect on their subjective experiences, thereby enhancing the authenticity of their professional work. Investigating ECCE practitioners' education and training experiences can assist determine whether Osgood's recommendations are valid.

Therefore, an argument exists that lesser-trained ECCE practitioners lack a professional identity due to the societal and governmental perception of childcare and education as a child-minding service and that it is often understood as thus by the lesser-qualified practitioners. In South Africa, the lack of recognition for the educational component of their practice significantly influences practitioners' perceptions of their education and training experiences (Moloney & Pope 2015). The lack of recognition manifests itself in low job satisfaction, heavy workloads, inadequate remuneration and poor working conditions. Therefore, clear links exist between practitioners' education, training experiences, qualifications and professional identities. Early childhood care and education practitioners with university qualifications may be convinced that they are qualified for the positions in ECCE services, based on their perceptions of early childhood education and their own training experiences, qualifications and professional identity. Consequently, they view themselves as professionals, whereas people generally view practitioners with lesser qualifications as 'babysitters' (Cohen 2013).

The hierarchy of educational backgrounds, qualifications and training experiences (ranging from a lack of proper training to a Bachelor of Education) is a significant factor undermining ECCE practitioners' professional identity. Mitchell et al. (2011) mention that practitioners' perceptions of their education, training experiences and qualifications are underpinned by clear and consistent policies, initiatives, funded professional development, reflective practices and curricular guidelines. Dalli (2008) states that governmental initiatives, earned qualifications and equity in payments potentially provide practitioners with professional recognition, although they still appear to need more positive perceptions of their education, training experiences and qualifications to regard themselves as professional practitioners.

## Challenges faced by early childhood care and education practitioners regarding their education and training

Education White Paper 5 (DoE 2001a) states that independently funded ECD institutions are better funded and use their financial resources to serve their practitioners well instead of relying on state intervention. Unfortunately, families in rural centres cannot always pay the same high fees that families in urban areas can afford. This results in differences in status, as reported by Colletta and Reinhold (1997), who state that there was already a minimal acceptance of the importance of ECD for the 0–6 years age group during the Apartheid era and that practitioners were not considered. In a recent study conducted by Atmore (2019) on the interpretive analysis of ECD policies in South Africa following apartheid, he recognised that white papers on education make little financial provision for children aged birth to four. Lack of funds could translate into the lack of quality ECD services in South Africa.

The majority of practitioners at rural ECCE centres in South Africa, unlike their urban counterparts and professional educators, are not employed by the provincial DoE. For example, the Department of Social Development (DSD) conducted a national audit in 2013 to establish the statuses of ECD centres in the country, where it was found that unregistered ECD centres in rural areas lack trained practitioners and proper management structures and experience high personnel turnovers (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013). In line with the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, Mbarathi, Mthembu and Diga (2016) also assert that many ECD centres, especially in the rural areas, do not have resources for quality teaching and learning because they are not registered to qualify for government subsidy. Baloyi and Makhubela (2018) argue that these under-resourced ECD centres lack government support because they do not meet the required DSD registration standards. Bipath and Aina (2022) also highlight that ECD practitioners in the rural areas are not provided with good quality training by government to teach young children. Therefore, they suffer certain disadvantages, such as poor wages and low job satisfaction, often resulting from severe workloads. Rural practitioners generally receive inadequate remuneration, supporting the unfortunate public perception that working with young children is a low-status profession, whereas practitioners in urban centres earn a living wage (Shaeffer 2015). Moloney and Pope (2015) illustrate this situation when they place prominence on the necessity for adequate remuneration commensurate with higher qualifications and competencies, thereby supporting the recruitment and retention of educated and well-trained practitioners in ECCE centres. Most urban practitioners are well qualified and fluent in English (DSD 2015). Practitioners in rural centres lack effective monitoring, experience and adequate professional development opportunities, whereas urban practitioners often attend ECD workshops, short courses and seminars for professional development (Bipath & Aina 2022).



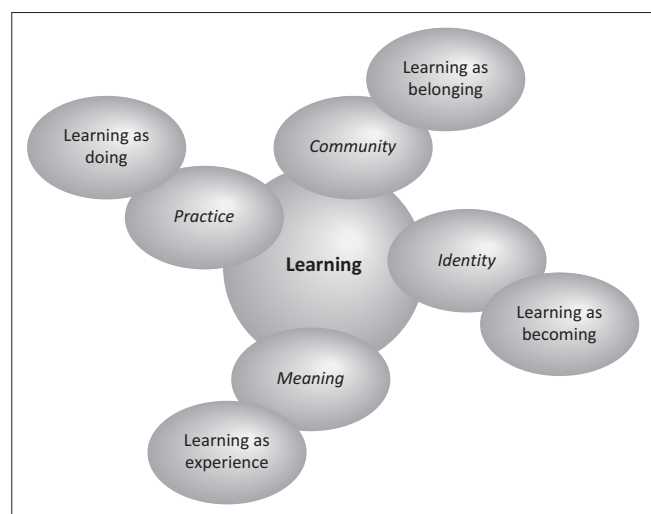
## Theoretical framework

A social theory of learning was utilised in this study to understand the effect of education and training experiences of South African ECCE practitioners in both rural and urban settings clearly. Wenger's (2009) social theory of learning focuses on the following four components: (1) experience can enhance an individual's ability through the combination of a meaningful life and the world we inhabit, (2) shared practices and collaboratively used historical and social resources can achieve common goals, (3) community involvement as evidence of competencies and (4) education can change a person's professional identity. These components are intertwined and interrelated, as illustrated in Figure 1.

## Social theory of learning components

Learning is at the centre of Figure 2, which indicates that learning is the focal point of this study and that all other elements relate to it. The elements that revolve around learning are community, practice, identity and meaning. The respective ECCE practitioners are other focal points in this study as the researcher seeks to understand how the elements of community, practice, identity and meaning as described by Wenger (2009) give meaning to ECCE practitioners' education and training. How those four components assist in understanding ECCE practitioners' education and training experiences in rural and urban settings is explained in the following paragraphs.

Wenger (2009) states that we belong to a community of practice, either at home, work, school, sport or hobbies. The communities develop their own practices, routines, rituals, artefacts, symbols, conventions, stories and histories. Similarly, Osgood (2012) argues that community practices involve workplace cultures and enhance a practitioner's professional status and identity. This study explored how ECCE practitioners perceived engagement with their communities of practice to obtain some support in their education and training.



Source: Wenger, E., 2009, *Social learning capability: Four essays on innovation and learning in social systems*, viewed n.d., from <https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/09-04-17-Social-learning-capability-v2.1.pdf>

FIGURE 1: Wenger's social theory of learning.

The concept of learning immediately invokes images of classrooms, training sessions, teachers, textbooks, homework and tests (Wenger 2009). Wenger argues that learning is an integral part of our everyday lives and a part of our participation in communities and organisations, according to people's recorded experience. In this study, the practices refer to the learning opportunities available for ECCE practitioners to improve their education and training.

Social, political and economic contexts significantly influence the ECCE community's perceptions of practitioners' profession (Moloney & Pope 2015; Moylett et al. 2011). Rodgers and Scott (2008) argue that a strong professional identity promotes job satisfaction, self-efficacy, commitment and motivation. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) agree that practitioners' professional identity is influenced by cultural, political, economic and social factors. This study seeks to understand how ECCE practitioners in urban and rural settings near Durban perceive themselves, respectively.

According to Wenger (2009), the ultimate purpose of learning is to inject meaning into our experiences of the world we live in and our engagement with it. By the same standards, the purpose of ECCE practitioners' education and training is to produce meaningful teaching and learning experiences for young children.

## Methodology

A qualitative research approach in the context of an interpretive model was chosen to investigate the perception of ECCE practitioners regarding their education and training in rural and urban settings in Durban, South Africa. This approach allows for rich and in-depth exploration of the research question and permits the researcher to obtain first-hand knowledge of participants' thought processes and relevant elements in research settings (Creswell & Poth 2016). Multiple case studies permit the selection of several cases, which proves advantageous as they highlight the differences amongst many instances (Crowe et al. 2011). Hence, a multiple case study method was espoused by using a sample of one rural centre located near Durban at Lindelani and an urban centre located in the Newlands East suburb in Durban to gain a clear understanding of the effects that education and training experiences had on South African ECCE practitioners in both rural and urban settings. The rural centre was situated in an informal settlement area and constructed with corrugated iron, planks and recycled materials. The centre catered for children from 18 months to 6 years. The class sizes were large but not divided appropriately for effective teaching and learning. There were no learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) and no secured cupboards, telephones or information and communication technologies (ICT) connectivity. Basic services like running water and ablution facilities were also lacking. The centre is not registered with the DSD because of the state of their infrastructure. The practitioners improvised most of the educational resources. The practitioners earn monthly wages

of only R800 per month. The user fee charged by the centre is R250 per month. The urban ECCE centre is built with bricks and asbestos. The big playground contains swings, a see-saw, a jungle gym and colourful tyres where children can play. The classrooms are large and the walls are filled with colourful charts and teaching aids. This centre is registered with the DSD. The centre charges R800 as user fee.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select five practitioners from each centre, 10 participants in total. The participants for this study were heads of the centres (2) and practitioners (8) teaching young children from birth to school-going age. All the participants selected for this study have been teaching at their respective centres for 3 years or more. See Table 1 for the participants' biographical information. This study used focus group semi-structured interviews, observations and fieldnotes to gather data. Focus group semi-structured interviews helped the researchers obtain in-depth attitudes, insights, perceptions and feelings of ECCE practitioners regarding their education and training experiences in rural and urban ECCE settings (Mack 2012). The non-participant observation allowed the researchers to capture relevant detail and record those observations instead of depending on a subject's self-report in response to statements or questions (McMillan & Schumacher 2010). The indoor and outdoor learning environment of the participating ECCE centres were observed. The researchers ensured that the sample population's participation in the study was voluntary and that their privacy and identities were protected. Pseudonyms were used; for instance, rural centres are referred to as Centre A and urban centres are referred to as Centre B. Ethical permission from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education to conduct interviews and receive information from the participants was obtained. Ethical clearance was also granted from the ethics committee at the University of Pretoria.

In this study, codes were generated from the transcribed data and categorised into themes and sub-themes. The researchers ensured that the sample population's participation in the study was voluntary and that their privacy and identities were protected. The researchers informed the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time, should they wish to do so.

**TABLE 1:** Participants' information.

Centre	Practitioner's code	Position	Age	Years of experience	Qualification
A	P1	Head of the centre	60	25	Diploma in ECD (2 years)
A	P2	Practitioner	21	4	No qualification
A	P3	Practitioner	27	3	No qualification
A	P4	Practitioner	45	5	No qualification
A	P5	Practitioner	40	4	No qualification
B	P6	Head of the centre	56	10	Diploma in ECD (2 years)
B	P7	Practitioner	36	5	Diploma in ECD (3 years)
B	P8	Practitioner	26	6	Certificate in ECD
B	P9	Practitioner	25	5	Diploma in ECD (3 years)
B	P10	Practitioner	24	4	Certificate in ECD

ECD, early childhood development.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (No. EC 18/02/02).

## Results

Engelbrecht (2016) indicates that thematic analysis is an effective data analysis strategy in qualitative research; hence this study used thematic analysis. The results are discussed in terms of four themes generated from the data. Table 2 depicts the themes and sub-themes that provide answers to the research questions underpinning the study.

### Perceptions of their education and training

The findings indicate that in the selected centres, the political, social and economic contexts influence how communities and practitioners perceive the ECCE workforce. The narratives delivered by the rural practitioners were all similar but differed from the narratives of the urban centres. The sub-themes that emerged from this theme are community beliefs about the ECCE profession and ECCE practitioners' perceptions about their education and training, as explained below.

### Differences between rural and urban practitioners regarding professional identity

Participants in this study described professional identity in terms of self-esteem, professional dedication, job satisfaction, task orientation and work motivation, all of which are consistent with Karaolis and Philippou's (2019) principles of identifying a teacher's professional identity. The gathered data revealed that the practitioners at the respective settings have different views regarding their professional status. Centre A's practitioners do not regard themselves as 'professional' whilst Centre B's practitioners recognise themselves as professionals. These views were captured in the extracts below.

These are some examples of satisfaction expressed amongst urban ECCE practitioners:

According to P6:

'Daily experiences enhanced my teaching experiences, and I enjoy my work as an ECCE practitioner.'

**TABLE 2:** Themes related to each research question.

Research questions	Themes and sub-themes
• How do the ECCE practitioners in rural and urban settings in KwaZulu-Natal perceive their education and training experiences in performing their professional duties?	1. Perceptions of their education and training 1.1. ECCE practitioners' perceptions about their education and training experience 1.2. Community beliefs about the ECCE profession  2. Reputation of ECCE practitioners' qualifications 2.1. The importance of ECCE qualifications 2.2. Acquisition of qualification by practitioners
• What are some of the challenges ECCE practitioners encounter regarding their education and training to work with young children?	3. Challenges faced by practitioners 3.1. Insufficient skills 3.2. Unfair working conditions
• What support is required to improve ECCE practitioners' education and training?	4. Support 4.1. System support 4.2. Professional support

ECCE, Early childhood care and education.

P8 concurred:

'My qualification has given me in-depth insight into what early childhood care and education entails, so I am happy working with the little children because I am impacting lives, and with these, I see myself as a professional.'

Similarly, P10 shared this view:

'My experience as an ECCE practitioner helps me to gain knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of teaching young children, so I can say am proud to be a teacher of babies and young children in our community.'

Contrarily, the rural centre's practitioners were less confident in viewing themselves as members of a professional workforce, as seen in the extracts below.

P3 said:

'[I] am happy working with children, but with my salary, I am not happy, and I don't see myself as a professional because I don't get paid at the right time, and what we get is so little.'

P2 revealed her experiences:

'I am lazy when I wake up to go to work thinking of the stress, crying babies, stopping children from fighting each other and cleaning children's mess with getting paid with a peanut.'

P4 contributed a direct statement:

'To work here is a curse, but there is nothing I can do because I need to put bread on the table.'

The data indicates that the urban ECCE practitioners were happy with their education and training and viewed themselves as professionals because they seemed satisfied and proud to be identified with the profession. However, the rural practitioners appeared demotivated and did not regard themselves as professionals working in the ECCE sector. They described concepts and tasks like 'salary', 'stopping fights' and 'cleaning children's mess' as cursed elements. In 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) acknowledged that many ECCE practitioners experience poor working conditions, low wages and extra hours of work (UNESCO 2015). The findings of UNESCO (2015) are consistent with the experiences of rural participants in terms of professional identity.

### **Community beliefs about the early childhood care and education profession**

Many people often perceive ECCE centres as institutions for 'babysitting' duties and not for 'care and education' (Cohen 2013; Moloney et al. 2019), undermining both practitioners and the ECCE sector. These views were captured in the following excerpts:

According to P4:

'[When I am] working at ECCE centres, people take me for granted, I am treated lesser than a teacher in primary or high school.'

P2 stated that:

'They see us as babysitters and not with the eyes of professionals, I think we are treated as low-class teachers even by the government.'

P5 added:

'Sometime we work till very late waiting for the parents.'

P7 voiced her opinion in agreement:

'I think we are not recognised professionally because parents don't listen sometime. Example: when children are sick, parents still bring their children saying that they will be fine with us.'

Practitioners from the rural and urban centres revealed mutual feelings of being taken for granted by parents. This finding supports Shaeffer's (2015) view that the public perceives the ECCE profession as a low-status pursuit. The implication is that practitioners lose any inspiration to deliver professional work because the people they deal with tend not to recognise them as members of a professional workforce.

### **Early childhood care and education practitioners' qualifications**

The data revealed that ECCE practitioners' qualifications are important and that there should be a practical system to improve the educational experiences of the practitioners, most notably at the rural centre.

### **Perceptions of importance of early childhood care and education qualifications**

The data gathered included participants' views on why ECCE practitioners should be qualified to teach young children. However, the reasons cited varied amongst the participants. Below are some of the practitioners' comments in relation to the importance of being qualified to teach at an ECCE centre.

P6 stated that:

'qualification is very, very, very important, because we will get to know what we must teach children.'

P2 agreed with P6 by saying:

'qualification is necessary.'

She explained that:

'as a teacher, I will know how to teach younger child myself.'

and added:

'because a teacher who studies have knowledge of human development theories.'

P3 had the following two points of view:

'As a teacher, we can provide accurate information to children to develop them all round; we must teach them to play, read, write. If we are not educated, then we do not know how to teach them; I say qualifications is good and important.' (P6)

The findings indicate that the practitioners are aware of the importance of having gained the knowledge and skills

to teach young children through obtaining qualifications. The findings correlate with Rathus's (2006) statement that practitioners' qualifications are vital and essential for children's growth and development. Similarly, Thao and Boyd (2014) echoed those qualified practitioners are largely confident in communicating and implementing new ideas. Furthermore, according to Urban (2014), the level of training, education and experience of ECD practitioners is positively related to teacher behaviour in the classroom. The implication is that a lack of qualifications, as experienced by the majority of rural participants (see Table 1), will have an impact on their professional identity, including self-esteem, commitment and job satisfaction.

### Acquisition of qualifications by practitioners

The establishment of high-quality care and education environments in early childhood settings can guide training institutes to introduce teaching approaches that will help the workforce negotiate more critically collaborative, reflective and pedagogical environments, create new epistemological understandings and form strong perceptions of professionalism (Bretherton 2011). This view was reiterated in the following excerpts from the interviews.

P3 explained:

'Acquiring a short course in ECCE help me to identify the learning barriers at an early stage in the children I am teaching, so qualification improvement is important.'

P1, P2, P3 and P5 agreed, stating that improving ECCE education helped them obtain more study materials to learn how to teach the young children in their classes.

P6, P7, P8, P9 and P10 all expressed similar views, stating that short courses and workshops allowed them to gain more practical experience and exposure. They added that they experienced new ideas through attending short courses and seminars.

P4 indicated that:

'Attending short courses, workshops and seminars have helped us to know how and what to teach to be a professional.' (a view shared by P5)

The participants largely regarded future educational prospects and school readiness as important. They felt that better-qualified teachers would lead to better teaching. They also emphasised that they became more confident as a professional when they improved their knowledge through short courses and workshops. Even those participants without qualifications commented on the importance of earning suitable qualifications. These findings support the Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Educators (DHET 2017:12), which recognises the need to professionalise the ECD sector so that South Africa has adequately trained teachers to improve the quality of education provided to young children.

### Challenges faced by practitioners

The data indicated that practitioners' ideas regarding their education and training experiences were partially shaped by their cultural and environmental beliefs. It became clear that daily challenges at their workplaces resulted from circumstances that included unfair working conditions, low salaries and a lack of professional recognition by the public. Biersteker and Kvalsvig (2007) indeed mentioned that the ongoing daily challenges faced by practitioners in the centres constituted a major risk factor for the ECCE sectors in South Africa. The practitioners' comments support this situation. The related sub-themes are discussed below.

### Insufficient skills

The practitioners at the rural centre encountered challenges that were different from those faced by practitioners at the urban centre. This situation suggests that their experiences are determined, in part, by socio-cultural factors. The study participants described some of their challenges in the excerpts below, starting with Centre A's practitioners expounding on their problematic situations.

P3 expressed her wish:

'I think if I have more training and knowledge, I will be able to teach the children in my class more than [I] am doing now.'

P4 added:

'I will like to attend seminars and short courses so that I can learn more about ECCE, but my peanut salary will not allow me; that is a challenge for me.'

P5 complained about another aspect:

'In my class, the children are overcrowded, and I am the only one; no assistant. So it is difficult to manage the children sometime, especially when they are playing. I wish I was trained to manage the large class.'

Clearly, Centre A's practitioners were calling for better access to skills and educational workshops. Centre B's practitioners instead wanted to upgrade their qualifications, as they felt that their knowledge was becoming outdated, as illustrated by the following comments.

P7 stated that:

'Our challenge is that we need continuous training so that we, as the teachers, can know the latest skills to teach in diversity classes.'

P6 added that:

'I think I need an upgrade in my qualification because I am an old teacher; new knowledge will help me to improve my teaching skills.'

The participants both in the rural and urban centres expressed the need for skills upgrade. The question to ask is why they are not accessing training; is it unavailable or unaffordable? In a



recent study by Bipath and Aina (2022), it was indicated that ECD practitioners are not provided with good quality training by government to teach young children. Richter et al. (2012) argue that training opportunities for all kinds of ECD practitioners, particularly those working with families and communities, should be subsidised. Training is essential for ECD practitioners who want to provide high-quality teaching-learning to young children, especially for those with little or no ECD training, which appears to be lacking in this study.

### Unfair working conditions

The ECD sector, according to Bipath and Aina (2022), is dominated by female employees who work very long hours and are typically underappreciated by the community. Five of the 10 participating practitioners emphasised their problems with unfair working conditions. The data illustrated, for example, that the ECCE practitioners are forced to work extra hours. They start work early in the mornings (07:00) and only leave the centre when it closes in the early evening (near 18:30). Sometimes a family would collect the last child very late at night. Early childhood care and education practitioners do not enjoy school holidays; they only close for special public holidays and December holidays. The practitioners in rural centres do not even enjoy tea or lunch breaks because they are perpetually looking after the children. This is because not enough practitioners are present to maintain order over the many children at their centre. Below are some of the responses from practitioners regarding their working conditions and unfair labour practices.

P1, P3 and P4 agreed:

'Poor working conditions characterised by low salaries whilst working long hours for little salary is discouraging.'

P5 described their working hours:

'We start work very early, from 7:00 AM to 18:30. After working hours, we have to wait for parents to come and pick up their kids late. This is one of the biggest challenges.'

P2 promptly added:

'Lack of maternity leave and unpaid leave and unpaid sick leave is not something nice at all. ... Poor working relationships and leadership, which results to high turnover rates is also of great concern which affect the quality of service we offer at our centre.' (P2)

The urban centre practitioners shared other experiences concerning unfair challenges at their workplaces.

P6 stated that:

'Most of the parents do not support the centre, even during fundraising, and that affect our plans to buy more resources to improve on our working conditions.'

P8 added:

'The centre needs to have a transport of its own in order to be able to pick up children to the centre every day and also the staff members.' (a view also expressed by P10)

The recorded comments by rural practitioners illustrated the unfavourable conditions, based on poor infrastructure, at Centre A. The rural centre participants' situation supports the findings by Ashley-Cooper, Van Niekerk and Atmore (2019), who stated that rural ECCE centres lack basic facilities such as potable running water, flush toilets and fencing around centres. Biersteker and Dawes (2008) highlight the fact that previous neglect of ECCE sectors in South Africa contributes to their being unattractive to potential employees because the working circumstances involve extra hours and poor pay.

### Support for early childhood care and education practitioners

The DSD gives an R17 per child subsidy to some registered ECD centres (DSD 2020), which varies by province each year. Many ECD centres, particularly in rural regions, lack resources for quality teaching and learning, according to Mbarathi et al. (2016), because they are not registered to receive a subsidy. The governmental support given to the participating centres differs because Centre B is registered with the DSD whilst Centre A is not. Centre A is not registered because it does not meet the governmental requirements for registration. This theme is also divided into two sub-themes.

### Systems support

The compiled data further indicates that the ECCE practitioners require other forms of support regarding education and training, including shorter training endeavours (such as yearly certificate courses), more indoor learning resources to enhance children's school readiness, food programmes and improved education transportation. Relevant comments by some participating practitioners are shown below.

P7, P8 and P10 stated respectively:

'It will be better if the government can provide short training courses and workshops.' (P7)

'If there are termly or yearly courses to help practitioners with upcoming and new ideas that are trending now.' (P8)

'Short courses, workshops, seminars are more needed for us to offer good services.' (P10)

P1 agreed:

'We need more resources (for reading, maths and life-skills) to teach children.'

P4 and P6 also endorsed this viewpoint.

P2 narrated her concerns as follows:

'Government does not provide funds for feeding schemes, resources and transport, but the centre always does fundraising for resources.'

The data indicates that access to improved teaching and learning resources should help normalise the centres' working conditions. The practitioners emphasised the need for financial funding to meet the needs of the young children at their centres, such as access to learning materials. Both



centres' practitioners expressed the need for workshops to further their professionalism; they failed, however, to mention if they would have the time and funds to enable such plans. Still, the participants appeared to be selfless practitioners committed to ECCE excellence. This research revealed vast differences between the perceptions of rural and urban practitioners. Urban practitioners mostly wanted to improve themselves through workshops and seminars, whereas the rural practitioners wanted better availability of teaching resources. The rural practitioners were aware of their lack of status and qualifications, and they knew that those circumstances compromised good quality education for the children.

### Professional support for early childhood care and education practitioners

The recorded comments from the participants revealed a plea for assistance from knowledgeable others to further the practitioners' professional development. Such support can be in various forms, such as sharing empowering knowledge from mentors, advice on leadership qualities or illustrations on how to structure teaching sessions for young children. Some recorded views are shown here.

P3 stated:

'Being around other practitioners, I get support where clarification is required in teaching and also in different teaching strategies.'

P4 shared her experiences:

'Supports I received from other practitioners, like using their training experiences and knowledge, empowers me where I feel I am lacking teaching strategies for tackling problems that I am facing since I do not have any qualifications.'

P2 agreed:

'We are able to assess learners more effectively due to empowerment in the form of learning from mentors in the centre have enhanced our teaching skills.' (a viewpoint supported by P7)

P6 and P8 concluded that they work together and guide themselves when they need help handling a difficult situation. P6 added:

'Other staff give support and also networking from other centres.'

This research revealed that (rural) Centre A, like many others, does not receive any financial support from the government because of not being registered with the DSD. This finding corroborates the Project Preparation Trust of KwaZulu-Natal's (2014) report that many centres could not be registered with the department because of the unrealistic criteria involved. Centre A lacks the infrastructure which is either directly or indirectly conducive to effective teaching and learning, such as proper ablution facilities, electricity, educational toys, playgrounds and computers. Furthermore, practitioners in rural areas generally earn low wages, whereas urban practitioners largely earn living wages. Practitioners

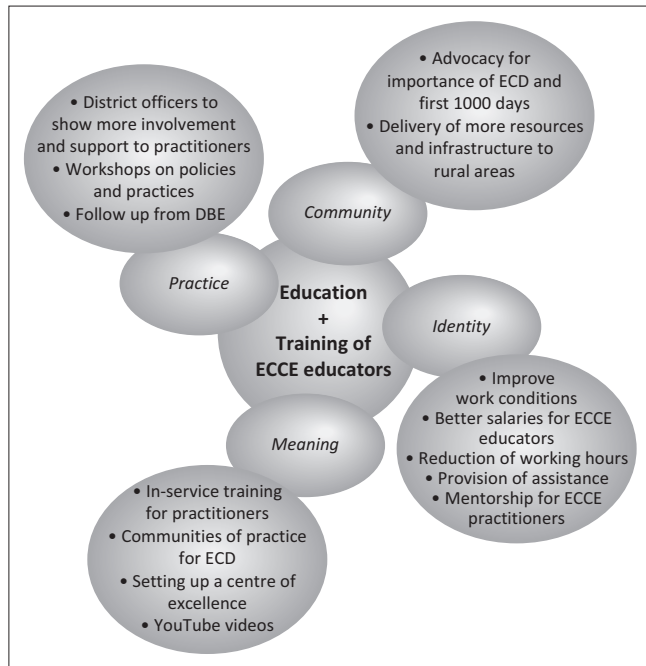
who have rewarding and positive experiences during their placement at ECCE centres tend to develop positive attitudes towards the ECCE sector and are likely to display initiative during their work with young children (Thorpe et al. 2011).

## Recommendation and conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that ECCE practitioners, especially those working at rural centres, do not have the necessary education and training to execute their duties effectively. The practitioners clearly require some level of higher qualification in ECD to deliver quality teaching and learning to young children. Hence, it may not be realistic to expect quality ECCE at both participating centres in this study. It is therefore recommended that interventions are made to raise the educational level of the practitioners and thereby enable them to properly fulfil their primary responsibilities to the young children in the ECCE domain. Additional in-house training to promote the practitioners' professional growth is also recommended. The rural practitioners who participated in this study had little or no ECCE qualification. President Cyril Ramaphosa, in his state of the nation address in 2019, stated that South Africa needs to prioritise children's education in poor communities, starting in early childhood (South African Government 2019). Qualified ECCE practitioners deployed in rural and other poor communities can better assist the educational development of vulnerable children, thereby contributing to breaking the circle of poverty in South Africa. This research therefore recommends that higher education institutions, NGOs, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges and the DBE collaborate and work consistently to ensure that practitioners are adequately qualified, thereby improving the quality of the care and teaching of young South Africans, both in urban and rural areas.

The participating ECCE practitioners and heads of centres in this study strongly argued for various forms of governmental and professional support. This includes (1) support in terms of the monitoring and guiding of practitioners in their day-to-day activities, (2) support to enable productive engagement with the wider practitioners' community through mentorships, workshops and sharing of good practices and (3) sponsorship for further studies to enhance practitioners' confidence, competency and their senses of self and professional identities. This study hence suggests that district officials from the departments of Social Development and Basic Education support ECCE centres by monitoring their activities and, where necessary, correcting and improving their service delivery capabilities. The researcher also recommends the establishment of functional communities of practices, such as ECD forums, where the centres can communicate with the various members of practitioners' communities and receive professional support. The final recommendation is that the government sets up centres of excellence as models for the rural and urban centres to emulate.

This study supports previous studies by finding that several ECCE practitioners do not have the relevant education and training to function effectively at their workplaces. Hence, further research is recommended by investigating the



ECCE, early childhood care and education; ECD, early childhood development.

**FIGURE 2:** Pam Zulu's model of enhancing early childhood care and education practitioners' education and training.

following: what constitutes the content for diploma and degree programmes for ECCE educators in South Africa and globally? How is work-integrated learning merged into the curriculum? How can district officials and training providers work together to provide the best qualifications and highest standards of training for educators, and what support in terms of education and training do district officials provide to ECCE practitioners?

In summary, the findings from the data, theoretical framework and literature review of this study guided the researchers to formulate a model of enhancing ECCE practitioners' education and training in delivering quality care and education to children (Pam Zulu's model, see Figure 2). The Pam Zulu's model of enhancing ECCE practitioners' education and training is the novelty of this study as it presents vital concepts (community, identity, meaning and practice) that could enhance ECCE practitioners' education and training in offering quality teaching and care for children. These concepts and how they would enhance ECCE practitioners' education and training in improving their professional duties are stated in Figure 2.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as this was not negotiated in the informed consent and permission to conduct the study.

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