

# **INAUGURAL LECTURE**

**Siyakhulisa: An empowerment driven journey towards quality  
Early Childhood Development practices**

by

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# **Siyakhulisa: An empowerment driven journey towards quality Early Childhood**

## **Development practices**

**Elsa Fourie**

**Inaugural Speech: 15 April 2016**

### **ABSTRACT**

Investment in Early Childhood Development (ECD) is one of the most effective ways in which to decrease social disparities caused by adverse environments as such environments hamper the development of young children.

This paper presents a descriptive study of an early childhood development intervention project, grounded in a community-based research approach that resulted in more conducive ECD teaching and learning environments in township ECD centres in the Gauteng Province (Vaal Triangle) of South Africa. During the implementation of the project, grade R (the year before formal schooling) ECD practitioners from townships in the Vaal Triangle of the Gauteng Province participated actively. The ECD practitioners and the researcher planned the intervention programme together. The components of the intervention programme were implemented as intended and what was delivered went according to the way it was planned.

Data was gathered through administering open-ended questionnaires and conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews before- and after the intervention programme was implemented. The outcomes of this intervention varied. However, reflection from all the participants, including practitioners, lecturers and students indicates that this intervention has addressed the learning needs of Grade R ECD practitioners and resulted in a wide range of learning and development opportunities for children in townships in the Vaal Triangle.

It became evident that ECD practitioners face a number of challenges in the implementation of the knowledge and skills that they gained during the intervention programme. Limitations in the management skills of managers (sometimes referred to as principals with no formal training) of the ECD centres, were identified as the most critical challenges. These limitations will be addressed in a next intervention project.

## **KEYWORDS**

**Pre-school. Grade R. Intervention. Management skills. Community research.**

## INTRODUCTION

The effects of investments in early childhood development are extremely significant in the sense that poor and un-educated families become more aware of the importance of education and that early childhood development programmes can diminish the educational differences caused by socio-economic dynamics (Kartal 2007; Butler-Adam 2013; Msila 2014; Pardo and Woodrow 2014). Through investments in early childhood development, social disparities impacting destructively on the development of young children can be abridged. Interventions in early childhood development have the probability to break the cycle of poverty and inequality (Bateman 2012; Berlinski and Norbert 2015). For every year that the average schooling level of a population is raised, there is a consequent increase of 3.7% in long term economic progression (Collins and Wiseman 2012).

Interventions aimed at improving early childhood development could escalate school attendance numbers and the pass rates of learners in primary and secondary schools. In a country with high levels of poverty, pre-school education can play an abundant role in getting children school-ready (Kartal 2007; Steyn et al. 2011; Fourie 2014; Alameen 2015).

The Annual National Assessment Tests that were administered in South Africa in 2014 indicated improvement in learner performance of previous years. However, for the Mathematics test, Grade 9 learners scored below 10%; Grade 6 learners below 40%; and Grade 3 learners 60%. The overall number of pupils passing Mathematics with 70% or higher has fallen by 30% since 2008. The Home Language results revealed that Grade 9 learners scored below 45%; Grade 6 learners scored about 60%; and Grade three learners achieved an average of 58% (DBE 2014). Formal schooling age is too late for a child to commence with education as the early ages form the foundation of development and learning in later years, which emphasises the crucial importance of early childhood education.

Early childhood development can be defined as programmes, activities and involvements aimed at encouraging the overall health and education of children under the age of nine years (Preston et al. 2012). Early childhood development and education services are

defined as interventions that aim to encourage the cognitive, emotional, physical and social development of children before the age of formal schooling. These services are conducted by early childhood care- and educational institutions that serve in different ways, such as day-care centres and primary schools providing for pre-school children (Kartal 2007).

Investments made in the early childhood years are made for the future of societies. The results of these interventions can be summarized as follows: programmes that have a positive effect on children's cognitive development and school achievement, especially in low-economic environments (Kartal 2007); learning motivation, including social and emotional adaptability; and physical development (Mishra 2015).

It is evident that investments in human capital at the pre-school stage yield higher levels of return than investments made in adults who have left school. According to Kartal (2007) and Steyn et al. (2011) early childhood development forms the foundation of human development and provides financial resources in the long term. Investing in the early years of a child gives children a good start in life and offers good economic returns (Bateman 2012; Berlinski and Norbert 2015). It is also argued that if the quality of schooling in South Africa was at the level where it should have been, the gross domestic product would be R550 billion higher (23% above the current level of growth). However, the financial implications of early childhood development prevent the neediest of all from benefiting from these services.

Although a number of South African ECD practitioners (teachers without any formal qualifications) are enrolled for- or have obtained some form of ECD qualification, it is apparent that both enrolments and achievements are far too low to service the needs of the expanding sector. The majority of South African early childhood development practitioners have not been exposed to any form of training or professional development. Motlanthe (2011) states that teachers themselves have to take responsibility for their own professional development and that they should be held accountable for enhancing learning and teaching outcomes as there can be no successful reforms in education without the active involvement of teachers. Professional development is not uncomplicated, it takes time and for teachers in rural areas it is even more difficult because of travel costs and distances. To participate in professional development is a mind-set; it becomes a practice; and eventually an integral part of a person's personality achieved through being open to life-long learning (Johnson 2013).

Nonetheless, some communities may require experts to facilitate or guide teachers' motivation, knowledge, competences and reflection (De Clercq and Phiri 2013).

Teacher's attitudes towards their educational practices have an impact on their classroom effectiveness and behaviour (Shaw et al. 1973; Tok 2011). Several studies have reported positive changes in teacher's attitudes as a result of training (Wenger et al. 2002; Tok 2011; Askeff-Williams and Murray-Harvey 2015). According to Carleton et al. (2008) the self-efficacy belief held by teachers has a decisive role in their emotions, thought, behaviours and attitudes related to teaching. In the same way, their training experiences have an influence on their attitudes towards teaching. Attitudes are often negative because training programmes are not experienced as functional. Tok (2011) supports this statement when arguing that if everything stays theoretical, what is learned will not be useful in future.

It is argued that the principles of professional development emanate from foundational applied behaviour and analytical principles related to teaching and learning; from adult learning theory; from models for improving performance; from models in elementary and secondary education; from initial preparation practices; and from practices associated with on-going education or learning experiences designed to support, improve or change practice (Catania 2006; Snyder et al. 2011; Mishra 2015).

The South African Minister of Education (Motsekga 2011) as well as Azam (2014) assert that the strongest pillar of any nation is teachers, as they are the ones who convey knowledge, skills and values to learners who are the future adults of the country. According to Azam (2014) the accomplishments of any education system is established through the quality of teachers as they play a vital role in building the character and personality of young children. Contrariwise, there is a shortage of well-trained teachers for early childhood development in South African townships (Steyn et al. 2011; Atmore 2013; Fourie 2013). Consequently, the standard of education for most learners in disadvantaged areas is of inadequate quality (Azam 2014). Practitioners moreover have to teach grade R learners in environments that are not encouraging quality teaching and learning. In South Africa, township ECD centres are considered low-economic environments and practitioners often have to perform their teaching duties without the basic resources (Fourie 2014).



General education and adult learning literature suggest that personnel preparation reform (in-service training) efforts need to incorporate underlying assumptions about individual and systemic change. These assumptions include comprehensive and long-term approaches; practitioners that recognize the gap between their current and desired knowledge and skills; and practitioner participation in the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions (De Clercq and Phiri 2013). Nonetheless, in-service training is often characterized by a ‘crisis mentality’ with efforts focused on training large numbers of individuals rapidly to meet workforce demands (Snyder et al. 2011). The quality of such interventions is often described as uneven, unpredictable and generally ineffective with regards to intended outcomes (De Clercq and Phiri 2013). Training large numbers of practitioners rapidly and hoping for knowledge acquisition and skill application without systematic support or follow-up is unlikely to be a meaningful catalyst for significant improvement or change in intervention practices (Snyder et al. 2011; Askell-Williams and Murray-Harvey 2015).

There is always tension between the imperatives of delivery (product) and community participation (process). Pressure for immediate results often undermines attention to institution building (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000). In many development projects the hard issues (technology, finances, physical- and material issues) are perceived as being more important than the soft issues (community involvement, decision making processes, building capacity). This view might destroy the most noble development initiatives. The reason could well be that the community is only used as a means to achieve the developer’s- or the researcher’s goals. Any pressure to deliver results can force development workers or researchers to take matters out of the hands of the community and to complete everything themselves. Achieving anticipated results in too short a time have caused many unsuccessful development efforts.

Professional development should be characterized by facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the attainment of knowledge in practice (Snyder et al. 2011; Moyo and Ndlovu 2012; Askell-Williams and Murray-Harvey 2015). Any conceptual framework for such development should include the ‘who’ (learner), the ‘what’ (content) and the ‘how’ (facilitation).

The emphasis on the ‘who’ indicates that ECD practitioners vary widely with respect to their qualifications, experience, race and culture and that they serve children who are themselves diverse in many aspects. The ‘what’ defines the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will be the focus of the professional development programme. It is important to have a deep understanding of the principles of teaching and learning and of what a practice looks like in applied settings. It is essential to be clear about the purpose of the practice; to understand which guidelines and standards relate to such practice; and to know what evidence exists to show that it is effective (Moyo and Ndlovu 2012). The ‘how’ helps to identify professional development approaches. Professional development is more likely to enhance teaching and learning when it is characterized by the following elements:

- Consist of content specific rather than general instruction.
- Is aligned with instructional goals; learning outcomes; and materials that practitioners use in their practice.
- Learning opportunities are intensive; are sustained over time; and include guidance and feedback on how to apply specific practices through methods such as coaching, consultation or facilitation (Buysse et al. 2009; Askell-Williams and Murray-Harvey 2015).

In order to address the shortage of well-trained practitioners for early childhood development in South African townships, many intervention programmes have been- and are still being introduced. Such programmes should be aligned with the desired outcomes and should be structured in a manner that would lead to implementation in practice. It is essential to identify clear objectives; to present theory about knowledge and skills to be acquired or mastered; to demonstrate and model; to create opportunities to practice skills in real-life contexts; to give feedback about the implementation; to follow-up in order to support implementation; and to help to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context (Snyder et al. 2011; Butler-Adam 2013; Mishra 2015).

The development needs and challenges of poor and demoted people should play a crucial role during the engagement between universities and communities (Alexander et al. 2010; De Clercq and Phiri 2013; Fitzgerald and Zientek 2015). Through their participation, community members are in a position to give a realistic picture of the reality on the ground

(Moyo and Ndlovu 2012). However, literature indicates that the majority of development projects are introduced by outsiders and that these projects are seldom founded spontaneously by the community itself (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000; McNall 2015). In this regard Botes and Van Rensburg (2000) refer to Africa as a graveyard of development projects due to failures resulting from externally induced development- and externally managed processes. Remarks from community members in this regard include:

*“They arrive already knowing everything. They come here and look around, but they see only what is not here” (Indian Villager).*

*“Developers come overnight they just arrived. They did not tell the people. They made us think that they were coming to save us” (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000).*

Developers often think that they know best and therefore their main function is to transfer knowledge to communities whom, by definition, know less. Professionals often regard themselves as the exclusive owners of developing knowledge and as having the monopoly of solutions which consistently underrate and under-value the capacities of local people to make their own decisions as well as to determine their own priorities. It seems difficult for developers to view community needs and opportunities through the eyes of the end- recipients (Dudley 1993; Ennis and West 2013; McNall 2015). Therefore, participation often starts after projects have already been designed and community participation in such cases is nothing more than efforts to persuade beneficiaries what is best for them. According to Jaftha (2013) over eagerness often leads to academics, students and communities falling into several gaps, including the notion that the university has all the knowledge; the notion that the university must develop the community; and the notion that academics assume that they know everything. Community engagement is a human issue, an interface between human groupings (Fitzgerald and Zientek 2015). In this regard Jaftha (2013) advises as follows: ‘Never let your ‘sorrow’ for a community become the driving force for your decision to become involved in community engagement. Be honest with yourself and your partner community’.

In the higher education sector, community engagement refers to co-operative partnerships between higher education institutions and the communities that they serve. A

two-way engagement, whereby knowledge, skills, expertise and resources required to develop and sustain a developing society is availed, should be the aim (Alexander et al. 2010; Butler-Adam 2013; McNall 2015). Development professionals should thus adopt the motto of planning ‘with’ and not ‘for’ the people. This should lead to a change from being an ‘implementing agent’ to being a ‘facilitator’. For this reason the participants in this research were fully involved in determining the contents of the training programme.

Community involvement requires a sound understanding of the problems and challenges facing communities (Van Schalkwyk 2013). Due to the complexity of communities, guidelines for participatory development can never be seen as blueprints, but rather as frameworks of values, principles and approaches to promote the ideals of participatory development. Participatory developers should:

- demonstrate awareness of their status as outsiders;
- respect the community’s contribution in terms of their skills, knowledge and potential;
- promote co-decision making in defining needs, goals and plans;
- guard against the domination of a specific interest group; and
- acknowledge that soft issues are important (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000).

It is a well-known fact that a positive school environment that contributes to quality teaching and learning consists of various elements, including: managers’ and practitioners’ high-quality capacity; a school culture and climate conducive to teaching and learning; a sound school organizational structure; committed school teams; effective human resource management; effective resource management; efficient conflict resolution; and noble school–community relationships (Tok 2011; Cumming et al 2015). Research conducted on the wellbeing of South African educators in general, makes it evident that many educators do not experience their work environments as positive. The behaviour of principals as well as educators, according to these investigations, does not contribute positively towards the development and establishment of environments conducive to teaching and learning (Vos et al. 2012). It is therefore vital to deal with these complexities before it can be expected that anything would change as far as education in South Africa is concerned.

Early childhood educators are critical to high quality ECD provisioning that supports noble outcomes for learners (Cumming et al. 2015). It is often asserted that only teachers with formal teaching qualifications are well qualified and equipped. Nevertheless, necessitating a formal qualification for educating young children may result in demoting practitioners who may not have access to acquire the necessary formal education (Blank 2011; Pardo and Woodrow 2014; [Scarinci et al. 2015](#)). There is a need to identify alternative routes for the professional development of ECD practitioners.

Limited empirical research exists to guide researchers and developers in terms of the needed knowledge and instructional strategies that can lead to improved ECD programme outcomes. Available literature regarding ECD training mainly focuses on describing the structural features of the intervention and its contents (Snyder et al. 2011). Although Botes and Van Rensburg (2000) as well as Cumming et al. (2015) emphasise the importance of community contribution and participation in the design of intervention programmes, insufficient literature exists in this regard. Research conducted by Snyder et al. (2011) as well as Askeff-Williams and Murray-Harvey (2015) indicates that most studies on ECD interventions focus on in-service training and staff development. However, out of 256 studies, only 159 reported that some form of follow-up support was provided after the interventions; only 59% reported the nature of the follow-up; and 66% reported the frequency of support in implementation. None of these studies reported whether the intervention components were implemented as intended.

There is a need to advance the scientific basis for ECD intervention programmes, but even more so, for the measurement of the success of implementation efforts and the establishment of follow-up support provided during- and after the interventions. There is also a need to share what works for whom; under what circumstances; and whether what was delivered went according to the way in which it was planned.

This paper discusses an ECD intervention project initiated in 2008 by the North West University (NWU) Vaal Triangle Campus that impacted positively on the quality of teaching and learning in township ECD centres in the Vaal Triangle of the Gauteng Province. The intervention components were implemented as was intended and follow-up support was provided during- and after the interventions.

## **AIM OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

The intervention project aimed to empower ECD practitioners with knowledge and skills that might offer them the opportunity to earn a living, but more importantly, to care, teach and develop society's most vulnerable members, namely young children. The aim of the project was translated into the following research objectives:

- To implement an intervention project aimed at empowering ECD practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to teach Grade R learners.
- To determine if the ECD practitioners gained knowledge and skills to teach Grade R learners.
- To determine if the knowledge and skills gained during the intervention programme were implemented at the ECD centres.
- To determine if implementation of the knowledge and skills made a constructive difference in the education and development of Grade R learners.
- To identify limitations in managing and supporting the implementation of knowledge and skills to teach Grade R learners.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION PROJECT**

In 2008 an official from the Department of Health requested the researcher to assist with the empowerment of ECD practitioners in a township in the Vaal Triangle. The researcher embarked on a journey with this project after reading and reflecting on the empirical and theoretical context for the work to be done. An intervention programme aimed at empowering ECD practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to teach Grade R learners, was designed and implemented. The project was conceived and since 2008 ECD practitioners from various townships in the Vaal Triangle have attended the training programme.

The practitioners who participated in this project had no recognized professional training in any field, nor did they have any training for educating and developing Grade R learners and they had to accomplish their daily duties with minimum resources. They had

some practical experience in the ECD field. The participants indicated that because of the fact that they had no formal qualifications, nobody takes what they do in terms of teaching and learning seriously.

A participant revealed that:

*'I have standard 8. I attended a course but it was more about cleanliness but not to learn the child. I cannot do the activities. I do not have knowledge of how I am supposed to teach learners'.*

Since 2008 a total number of 500 practitioners attended the training programme. These practitioners were responsible for the early childhood development of approximately 8000 Grade R learners. They voiced a serious need to improve their knowledge and skills as well as the teaching and learning environments at their respective ECD centres. The intervention took place over a ten month period each year. It involved lecturers and student teachers from the NWU, Vaal Triangle campus. The lecturers were well qualified and had in depth knowledge of ECD theories; teaching and learning strategies; application of theory in practice; and an ample background of psychology and emotional development. The students were in their final year of completing their degrees; had practical ECD experience; and possessed the knowledge and skills that were needed for the training of ECD practitioners.

Before the commencement of the intervention project each year, open-ended questionnaires were administered- and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted to determine the ECD practitioners' knowledge, skills and understanding of the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on school readiness. The responses to the questionnaire items and the interview questions were used as the basis for designing a training programme for empowering ECD practitioners. The practitioners were involved in determining the contents of the training programme.

The researcher, lecturers and students presented classes on two Saturdays per month. All classes involved theory and practical application under the supervision of the researcher, lecturers and students. The practitioners were expected to implement what they have learnt during the training in the teaching of their Grade R learners at their respective ECD centres. Practical examples of the learners' work had to be submitted at the start of each class. Each



class started with a session on reflection during which challenges and successes in the implementation of knowledge and skills were discussed. As the researcher was aware that implementing newly acquired knowledge and skills might be overwhelming for the practitioners, they were led through implementation by only implementing knowledge and skills acquired during one day (the Saturday) over a two weekly period (the two weeks following the Saturday). This cycle was repeated throughout the year, thus giving practitioners ample time to not only implement-, but also understand and master the knowledge and skills acquired.

All practitioners were assured of continuing assistance and support from the researcher during- and after the completion of the intervention programme. The researcher visited the ECD centres on a regular basis to assess whether implementation was effective and to support and assist the practitioners with challenges that they experienced.

The researcher administered the same open-ended questionnaire- and conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with all the participants at the end of the intervention project each year. The questionnaire was administered to establish whether the participants gained adequate knowledge about the basic content of an ECD programme. The interviews were conducted to determine if the practitioners experienced any challenges in implementing the knowledge and skills that they have attained through the training.

In 2014 and 2015 the aim of the intervention project was still to empower grade R ECD practitioners with knowledge and skills to teach Grade R learners and to create conducive teaching and learning environments in township ECD centres. The same group of participants attended in both years. The training focussed specifically on the preparation and implementation of grade R daily programmes. At the end of the training programme the researcher again administered open-ended questionnaires- and conducted final semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with all the participants in order to determine the success of the implementation of the knowledge and skills that they have acquired during the training.

Although the data obtained from the responses to the questionnaire items as well as the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews revealed that the practitioners had gained extensive knowledge and skills; were more motivated towards their daily work; had increased



self-confidence; understood that improvement was not dependent on costly resources; were prepared to take risks; and accepted that they will make mistakes; the practitioners also revealed that they experienced challenges in the implementation of their knowledge and skills at their respective ECD centres. According to the practitioners the most serious obstacle in their efforts to implement quality teaching and learning practices was the lack of management skills of the managers of the centres.

EDC practitioners are key figures in constructing a creative teaching and learning environment, but they do need support from their managers, which according to the findings of the research conducted since 2008 is not the case. The findings of the research conducted in 2015, emphasised the lack of management support. Based on the above discussion it becomes evident that in order to improve teaching and learning environments, there is also a need to identify limitations in management practices at ECD centres. These limitations have been identified and an intervention programme will be designed to assist managers in managing the implementation of quality ECD practices.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

According to Creswell (2009) the beliefs of the researcher regarding a research phenomenon and the role of the participants during the research, determine the research method chosen by the researcher. This research was grounded in a community-based research approach. The educational framework supporting the community-based research approach lies in adult education and it focuses on the learner having some control over the learning process and experience (Levin and Martin 2007). Community-based research enhances the practical experience of the student and teacher. This form of research has its foundations in applied research and is outcome-directed with advantages to communities (Sobrero and Jayaratne 2014). Theory is integrated with practice and creative production with the challenge of improving active citizenship (Berman 2011; Fourie 2014). Through reflection and community-based research, viewed and practiced as a scholarly activity, the context for a dialogue between theory and practice is created (Sobrero and Jayaratne 2014). The traditional roles of teacher and learner become indistinct and what emerges is a learning community including community members and the researcher.

Berman (2011) states that there is a serious need for universities to demonstrate social responsibility and commitment to the common good. Similar to teaching, research is a core university business and a key site for engaged scholarship, particularly in the form of applied research. However, in an environment that rewards publication, there was in the past little recognition and incentive for engaged scholarship (Winter et al. 2006; Sobrero and Jayaratne 2014). Nonetheless, the contribution of this form of research lies in integrating theory with practice and creative production with the challenge of enhancing active citizenship (Berman 2011). Research that focuses on specific community issues or that provides a point of university access for community members is a structural and functional indicator of an engagement agenda within universities. Although a strong pragmatism is evident in strategies of engagement, universities currently recognise social and cultural enrichment as a form of engagement (Hills and Mullet 2000; Winter et al 2006; Sobrero and Jayaratne 2014).

Boyer (1990) proposes four necessary and interrelated forms of scholarship that together amount to what is referred to as ‘scholarship of engagement’. The first element in his model is referred to as ‘scholarship of discovery’ which closely resembles the notion of research and contributes to the total stock of human knowledge. The second element is termed ‘scholarship of integration’ and underscores the need for scholars to give meaning to their discovery by putting it in perspective and interpreting it in relation to other discoveries and forms of knowledge.

The third element, ‘scholarship of application’ focuses on the fact that knowledge is not produced in a linear fashion as ‘theory’ leads to ‘practice’ and ‘practice’ leads to ‘theory’. Through reflection and community-based research, viewed and practiced as a scholarly activity, the context for a dialogue between theory and practice is provided. The final element in the model is termed ‘scholarship of teaching’. Within the framework of a scholarship of teaching the traditional roles of teacher and learner become blurred and what emerges is a learning community including community members, students, academics and service providers.

According to Hollander (2009) and Berman (2011) many researchers generate little scholarship in this manner as the tools for improving practice might overlap with the tools of the university researcher. However, the manner in which the researcher asks questions; the

manner in which the study is grounded in the literature; the higher standards held in employing the very same tools that practitioners may use and honouring participants' voices while maintaining conventional academic requirements, make such work scholarship and sets it apart from the world of practice (Sobrero and Jayaratne 2014; Fitzgerald and Zientek 2015).

A qualitative research design was utilized for this research (Creswell 2009). According to Creswell (2014) and Minichiello and Kottler (2010) qualitative research developed in social and human sciences as a reaction to the view that human beings can be studied in the same way than objects. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as multi-method focused, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of-, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

A qualitative research design was suitable for this research as it takes into account the context and the participants' categories of meaning. It further allows for examining complex issues; is dynamic; and the researcher can generate explanatory theory about the phenomenon.

Both open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were utilized as research instruments. Through conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with all participants, the researcher established a relationship with them and also gained their co-operation. The interviews were audio-taped and handwritten notes were used to support the recordings. This assisted in transcribing for the purpose of data analysis (Maree 2010).

Before the formal start of the project open-ended questionnaires were administered- and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted to determine the ECD practitioners' knowledge, skills and understanding of the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on school readiness. The responses to the questionnaire items and the interview questions were used as the basis for designing a training programme for empowering ECD practitioners. The researcher administered the same open-ended questionnaires- and conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with all the participants at the end of the intervention project each year. The questionnaire was

administered to determine whether the participants gained sufficient knowledge about the basic content of an ECD programme. The interviews were conducted to determine if the practitioners experienced any challenges in implementing the knowledge and skills that they have acquired through the training. The interviews were audio-taped and handwritten notes were used to support the recordings. This assisted in transcribing for the purpose of analysis (Maree 2010).

## **POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

The population of this research comprised of Grade R ECD practitioners in townships in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Since 2008 a total number of 500 practitioners attended the training programme. A purposive research sample of Grade R ECD practitioners was drawn from townships in the Vaal Triangle of the Gauteng province each year. Purposive sampling is based on the judgment of the researcher and gatekeeper and is composed of elements that contain the most common characteristics of the population (Creswell 2014). In this manner information rich sources were selected from which a great deal could be learned (Maree 2010).

The number of participants varied each year. However, during 2014 and 2015 the same group of practitioners (62) attended. Over eight years the research sample represented at least 10% of the research population.

## **RESULTS**

The intervention project aimed to empower ECD practitioners with knowledge and skills that could offer them the opportunity to earn a living, but more importantly, to care, teach and develop society's most vulnerable members, namely young children.

Before the intervention project was implemented open-ended questionnaires were administered- and semi structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted to determine the ECD practitioners' knowledge, skills and understanding of the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on school readiness.

The data were coded and similar codes were aggregated into themes. The data were compared and contrasted to determine the extent to which it agreed or did not agree with each other (Maree 2010). As the data correlated positively, more complete and well-substantiated conclusions could be reached. The following themes were identified:

### **Teaching and learning methodology and program content knowledge**

The participants indicated that they have very limited knowledge and understanding of the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of Grade R learners. The participants could not identify or define the concepts of counting, sequencing, sorting, recognizing shapes and colours, stories, songs, motor skills and visual and auditory exercises. The data further revealed that teaching and learning in the ECD centres do not focus on this very basic, but essential content.

#### ***Supporting quotes***

*'I dont know method the people talk about. I cannot do activities in classes'.*

*'I just teaching without knowledge. I have little knowledge about pre-school'.*

*'I was trained how to open a centre and the cleanliness. It is about management and not teaching the children'.*

*'I dont know about the literacy and life skills'.*

*'Sometimes I dont know what to do with our school children'.*

*'I tell the children stories but they do not understand it more'.*

#### **Health problems**

The participants indicated that they have learners who are ill-; who are disabled-; who suffer from epileptic attacks-; and who are HIV positive in their classes. The practitioners revealed that they have no knowledge or skills to deal with these learners.

### **Supporting quotes**

*'I have got a disabled child in my school. She only lies there. I have 3 children that are HIV positive and I have a child that has fits'.*

*'If children are sick parents don't report...sometimes you know the symptoms and it doesn't mean you are going to treat the child bad, but I want to be safe'.*

*'The parents send their children to school when they are sick'.*

*'When children get sick their parents ask me how I feed them yesterday because they are getting running stomach. That thing make me angry'.*

*'Children are sick at the centre and their parents phone is off'.*

*'One of the learner is having the Epilepsi'.*

*'Sometimes I have to take children to the clinic if they are sick. The parents are not educated. They do not take the ECD seriously'.*

### **Socio-economic problems**

The practitioners revealed that that they have to teach orphaned learners. Many of the parents of learners are un-employed. For this reason the participants are faced with a lack of the physical resources and equipment needed to teach Grade R learners. It became clear that socio-economic issues impact negatively on the implementation of practitioners' newly gained knowledge and skills as they are not in a position to fund the basic resources that they need to do so effectively.

### **Supporting quotes:**

*'They get money from the government, R200 per child...then they have three children to get money but they don't pay me'.*

*'I have 10 children who are orphans. They are poor and don't have food and clothes. I have no tables, chairs, no paint, crayons and no story books'.*

*'They write on the floor because I have no tables. I only have tyres outside for them to play on I have only one brush....we have to wait for one to finish. I also do not have crayons and paper'.*

*'I have experience as a teacher. I have been understand the poverty from the children'.*

*'I would like to give the children who are hungry food as early as seven a clock in the morning or help them so that they can eat three times a day'.*

*'The children come from abuser family, brothers abuse them by not giving them food'.*

*'Some learners come to school not have eaten, not having snacks for after lunch and the child is not able to concentrate with an empty stomach while others are eating'.*

### **A lack of sponsors**

The practitioners indicated that because of the fact that they have no sponsors, they often have to borrow money to buy food to feed the learners. Some of the practitioners get porridge from their respective churches.

#### ***Supporting quotes:***

*'I cry a lot....I can do nothing about the situation. I sometimes want to quit. I have no sponsors; I only depend on the children's money'.*

*'I have 24 children, sometimes 12 pay. In the winter I don't have heaters...the parents don't pay'.*

*'Sometimes the church help with porridge'.*

## **A lack of parental involvement**

The participants stated that due to a lack of parental involvement learners are often late or absent. Parents do not give attention to learners at home or support learners in playing, learning and developing. Some parents cannot assist learners because of the fact that parents themselves are innumerate and illiterate. These learners do not progress in their work and will not be ready for formal schooling. Many parents never communicate with the ECD practitioners and can therefore not support their children with their schoolwork.

### **Supporting quotes:**

*'The learner has a difficulty.....I write them a letter to help with the homework, they do not do it'.*

*'The most serious problem that I have is if parents doesn't communicate with you or tell you the child is sick or what'.*

*'I must encourage the parents not to hide so that the child can be helped'.*

*'Parents are not supportive in what you want from them'.*

*'Parents should get involved in their children's education and it must not be a teachers work only because by that a child won't be motivated and won't see any reason to learn'.*

*'I will like the parents to take a part of our child work and help me with their kid'.*

*'The commitment of parents, if I call a meeting some are coming others are not'.*

## **Funding issues**

The practitioners indicated that they do not have the funds to buy the basic equipment and materials needed for effective teaching and learning. They do not have enough



classrooms; cannot support ill children; and do not have money to buy nutritious food for the learners.

### ***Supporting quotes***

*'My centre is very poor, cause as you see there is no enough classes, no playing material and teaching equipments and chart on the wall'.*

*'My centre is empty'.*

*'I cannot change anything because I have no money'.*

*'I wish to have visitors at my centre to help with getting what is needed'.*

*'If I have the money I can take child to the doctor because I don't want children getting sick'.*

*'The owner does not provide me with equipment; we must buy material for the school'.*

*'Most serious problems are finance parents but did not want to pay'.*

*'My centre is a zozo when it is raining I get sick because water gets inside. I want my children to eat nutritious food, I don't get subsidy'.*

### **Overcrowded classrooms**

According to the practitioners they do not have enough space and classrooms are overcrowded.

### ***Supporting quotes***

*'There is not enough space, classes are not divided according to age groups'.*

*'I need the space, I don't have enough space'.*

*'Parents they don't pay, I cannot fulfill my promises of making another classes because I am overcrowded'.*

### **Learner conflict**

The data indicated that because of socio-economic problems there is a high degree of conflict amongst the learners.

#### ***Supporting quotes***

*'The most problem is conflict of young ones. They are poor, they don't want to share. They fight each other'.*

*'I must teach the children how to share and play with others'.*

*'Fighting of kids, they laugh other kids who don't have'.*

### **Low self- motivation**

The practitioners stated that because of all the challenges that they face, their self-motivation levels are low. They need to stay focused on being friendly and caring.

#### ***Supporting quotes***

*'I have to smile for the child and parent. I want to be more courageous'.*

*'I must change my situation try to be happy all the time and keep smiling in the morning'.*

*'I must talk to them nice and gentle and caring'.*

*'I will like to be always happy'.*

*'I want to be always positive, to have a confidence, to have self-esteem'.*

*'I must try to talk to them nice and make them laugh'.*

### **Lack of qualifications**

The data made it evident that the practitioners have little confidence in what they are teaching because of the fact that they are not qualified.

### **Supporting quotes**

*'I want to improve my learning skills and to learn about how to deal with children'.*

*'I don't know how to treat children who are slow'.*

*'I do not know how to treat the disabled learners...parents don't have money to take children to disable school'.*

*'One of the teachers should go for training of how to handle that disabled learner'.*

*'If we must change anything we must attend same workshops as a teacher because at the workshop we get new thing that we must teach our children'.*

### **Fear for change**

It became clear that the participants do not have the courage or motivation to change their ECD environments in order to be more effective in the teaching and learning of their grade R learners.

### **Supporting Quotes**

*'I do not have enough influence to change anything'.*

*'If there is a chance that something can fail I must rather not try it. Everybody will not support a new idea if it is a good one'.*

*'I must not challenge the way things are done'.*

*'People who change things have many new ideas everyday'.*

*'Small changes do not make much of a difference'.*

The data obtained from the open-ended questionnaires and the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the ECD practitioners clearly indicate that they face many obstacles and challenges in the implementation of a quality ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of grade R learners. The data also made it evident that many of the practitioners find it difficult to create an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning.

The researcher decided to conclude each interview with the following question:

*'If you experience so many challenges in the teaching and learning of your learners and also have to do the best with the minimum resources, why are you still a Grade R ECD practitioner?'*

The participants responded as follows:

*'The love of the children. I want them to have a future. My brother sends me R200, and then I share it with the children'.*

*'I even pray. I can see children suffering because of being poor, I feel sorry for them. Can I chase them away?'*

*'Sometimes I cook food and sell it. I have a friend who works at the clinic. In winter she gives me tablets'.*

Strydom (2011) asks the following question:

*‘..is this negative, all lost picture really all there is to education in our country?’ and then answers it by stating that ‘..there are people and schools and organisations doing what must be done – changing the lives of children and shaping the future’.*

Phillips and Hatch (1999) as well as Tok (2011) argue that many teachers choose teaching because they like children and want to make a difference in children’s lives. The responses to the open-ended questionnaires that were administered and the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews that were conducted support this statement. However, it seems that Grade R ECD practitioners also do not receive the admiration that used to be linked to the profession. Although teaching is a profession that guides minds and builds the character of learners for the future, it is often said that teaching is a very noble job and although it might sometimes be very rewarding, it does require a level of commitment that most other jobs don’t.

Based on the above responses, the ECD training programme was then designed and implemented to equip the practitioners with knowledge and skills of the basic contents of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of Grade R learners.

The implementation of knowledge gained in any workshop or course is always a challenge. Literature suggests that where knowledge and learning are well defined and understood, the related knowledge and learning activities are more effective and more likely to have a positive impact in practice. Participation in knowledge and learning activities and systematic approaches to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these activities, are of crucial importance (Ramalingham 2005; Azam 2014; Askeff-Williams and Murray-Harvey 2015).

By stating that ‘..when everything that is learnt stays theoretical, it will not be useful in the future’, Tok (2011) and Azam (2014) posit that training experiences that lead to practical implementation are more effective than those focusing on theoretical knowledge only. During this intervention programme, implementation had to be done immediately after each class. ECD practitioners had to give feedback on the implementation in the next class. The researcher visited the centres and witnessed how the practitioners implemented the

knowledge and skills that they had acquired in their Grade R classrooms. The visits also provided an opportunity for mentorship.

According to Rowley (1999) as well as Butler-Adam (2013) and Askeff-Williams and Murray-Harvey (2015) a good mentor is highly committed to the task of helping teachers find success and gratification in their work. Such commitment flows naturally from a resolute belief that mentors are capable of making a significant and positive impact on the life of another. The absence of mentors to support teachers (in the context of this research, ECD practitioners) impacts negatively on the implementation of newly gained knowledge and skills and as a result, on the development of learners. The researcher therefore assisted and supported the ECD practitioners during the visits to the ECD centres.

As suggested by Snyder et al. (2011) and Butler-Adam (2013) this intervention programme was aligned with the desired outcomes and structured in a manner that could lead to implementation in practice. Clear objectives were identified and theory about knowledge and skills to be acquired or mastered was presented, demonstrated and modelled. Opportunities to practice skills in real-life contexts; to give feedback about the implementation; to follow-up in order to support implementation; and to help to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context were created.

The researcher administered the same open-ended questionnaire- and conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with all the participants at the end of the intervention project each year. The questionnaire was administered to determine whether the participants gained sufficient knowledge about the basic content of an ECD programme. The interviews were conducted to determine if the practitioners experienced any challenges in implementing the knowledge and skills that they have acquired through the training. The data were analysed and coded and similar codes were aggregated into themes (Maree 2010). The data obtained from the responses to the open-ended questionnaires and the data generated from the semi-structured, face-to face interviews were compared and contrasted to determine the extent to which it agreed or did not agree with each other. The interviews were audio-taped and handwritten notes were used to support the recordings. Each year the data and results were used to make amendments to the programme, in order to make it more accessible and applicable for the practitioners. As the data correlated positively, more complete and well-

substantiated conclusions could be reached. The data revealed a significant improvement in the knowledge and skills of the ECD practitioners. The following themes were identified:

### **Teaching and learning methodology and program content knowledge**

The practitioners indicated that they have more knowledge about different teaching methodologies and Grade R programme content. They also revealed that they strive to implement what they have learned in their classrooms.

#### **Supporting quotes:**

*'You teach different methods, I now know how to involve the learners. Before the course, I did no activities in classes'.*

*'Before, I was just teaching without knowledge. When you teach us, the Monday I go and do it in classes'.*

*'This programme broadened my mind; I had little knowledge about pre-school, now I am getting more and more experience in running the ECD centre. I also put my part to the programme'.*

*'Yes, where I was trained we were taught how to open a centre and the cleanliness. It was more about management and this one is more about teaching the children'.*

*'I liked how we learn. We know something and they add to that'.*

*'When I go the Monday I do everything that I learn and I teach the other teachers at my center'.*

*'I want to do everything I have learned in my pre-school: the weather chart is there, the robots are there, alphabet, numbers 1-10 are on the wall now, the children can now visualise what they are learning'.*

*'When you teach, you are including everything. You are including Literacy, Numeracy, everything. You use different methods to make all learners understand. I was just telling them things and not involving them, but I have learnt to involve them. Now I am confidently and seriously teaching them, I used the methods you taught us, it is working, all the children are happy'.*

*'This workshop really helped me; you know the story of Adam and Eve? I used to teach them that story without showing them pictures, so now when I show them pictures they understand it more'.*

*'You have taught us practical ways of teaching Grade R for school readiness. To be honest, everything in the programme is now easy to follow, I can say that I am honoured to be part of this workshop, I am equipped to teach for school readiness'.*

### **Addressing health problems**

The participants postulated that although they have to deal with learners who are ill; who are disabled; who suffer from epileptic attacks; and who are HIV positive, they have started to form relationships with community structures that could assist them. Parents are also more supportive and the number of sick learners who are brought to the centres decreased.

#### **Supporting quotes:**

*'My ECD centre is clean and safe with security'.*

*'I had parent meetings and I address the parent about bringing sick children to the school. They must help me with this'.*

*'We have a school committee and work with clinics, social workers police, council and welfare'.*

### **Addressing socio economic problems**



The participants reported that they have started to address the issue of stigmatising children who come from poor families; who are often not well fed; and are sometimes abused.

**Supporting quotes:**

*'Confidentiality is a major thing and then to ask for help people must not stigmatise other people who are sick and poor'.*

*'I change the nutrition at my centre. I give the poor children vegetables from my own garden'.*

*'I ask the church people to help the children with food'.*

**Improving parental involvement**

The practitioners revealed that they have addressed the lack of parental involvement. They have established school committees; they link with support structures in their communities; have scheduled meetings; and inform parents about children with possible learning disorders.

**Supporting quotes:**

*'This course will make parents see that it is OK to bring their children to our centres. It can make children clever'.*

*'We have a school committee and work with clinics, social workers police, council and welfare'.*

*'I have meetings with the parents and teachers of my centre and report to them everything that happens in our centre and know their problems'.*

*'I had parent meetings and I address the parent about disorders. Cause we might take them for granted but at a later stage it has damaged the child'.*

*'Now we have schedule meetings so that we can oversee the running of the ECD centre in daily basis'.*

### **Addressing funding issues**

The practitioners indicated that although they still do not have the funds to buy all the equipment and materials needed for effective teaching and learning, they have made some teaching and learning materials; and cleaned the classrooms, the kitchen and the outside play area. The majority of the practitioners have started a vegetable garden.

#### **Supporting quotes:**

*'I can make my own equipment like using boxes to make the toys'.*

*'I change the nutrition if my centre making my own nor the vegetables fresh from my own garden'.*

*'I change the walls of the classroom by putting the work of children on walls'.*

*'I draw up a plan for everything I need. Especially difficult changes that need money. I will get help from the state or donations from big companies'.*

*'I start with easy changes that don't need money. Because small changes can make a big difference'.*

*'I can make my own equipment like using boxes to make the toys'.*

### **Overcrowded classrooms**

The ECD practitioners revealed that although they do not have the funds to build additional classrooms, they are motivated to find sponsors.

**Supporting quotes:**

*'I try to find sponsors for more classroom'.*

*'We have a school committee who help me to find the sponsors for making my centre bigger'.*

*'I try to find sponsors for teaching equipment'.*

**Addressing learner conflict**

The practitioners said that they focus on having discipline in their classrooms as well as during outside playing time.

**Supporting quotes:**

*'I now have the discipline in my centre and the good education for my children'.*

*'The children are now not to be alone during eating time, playing time and sleeping time. They do not fight so much'.*

**Improved self-motivation**

The data indicated that the practitioners are more motivated towards their daily work and that they want to be more friendly and caring. It also became evident that they have a vision for their teaching.

**Supporting quotes:**

*'I thought that people were going to laugh at me if I made a mistake, but the exercises were so good that I got fully involved, I am glad I can play again. The children in the centre will have a lot of fun; they will be looking forward to coming back just so that they can do these activities'. My ECD centre's yard is clean, I have security and nutritious food for the childrens'.*

*'We are starting our day early and very positive'.*

*'The vision that I have is higher than I used to imagine'.*

*'I must be self confident. I have enough influence to change anything. Only for the long term change like building renovations I will need money and donations'.*

*'Because I believe in myself I introduce new things to my centre so that these will be a change'.*

## **Qualifications**

The fact that the ECD practitioners attended the training reflected positively on their self-esteem and as a result, on their confidence to teach grade R learners.

### **Supporting quotes:**

*'I learn that children who are suffering from conduct disorder must immediately be treated'.*

*'I now understand the difference of children and when we have problem we ask for help from people who know more than we do'.*

*'I now do things in order and on time and I take care of admin, food, times, address staff, parents and things'.*

## **Fear for change**

The data revealed that the ECD practitioners are more motivated and empowered to change their ECD environments in order to be more effective in the teaching and learning of their grade R learners.

### **Supporting quotes:**

*'I learn that I must have a dream and first big dream so that my dream can come true. I am prepared to make mistakes and try again and accept failure'.*

*'I start with easy changes that don't need money. Because small changes can make a big difference'.*

*'I must be self confident. I have enough influence to change anything. Only for the long term change like building renovations I will need money and donations'.*

*'Because I believe in myself I introduce new things to my centre so that these will be a change'.*

*'I learn that I must have a dream and first big dream so that my dream can come true. I am prepared to make mistakes and try again and accept failure'.*

*'In my classroom I change everything and came with a new system even. I plan thing after I act to do that thing because I must do quality teaching'.*

The above data confirms the arguments of Marais et al. (2011), Wenger et al. (2002), Tok (2011) and Butler-Adam (2013) namely that quality ECD interventions can result in significant benefits in terms of school-readiness and achievement. The data shows significant improvement in the knowledge and skills of the practitioners. As practical examples of the learners' work had to be submitted at the start of each class, it became evident that the learners were participating in school readiness activities. During visits to the ECD centres the researcher further noted that although activities were done with minimum resources, effective teaching and learning was taking place in the centres. This is a positive outcome given the shortage of well-trained ECD teachers and the lack of training opportunities available in South African townships (Steyn et al. 2011). However, during the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the participants the researcher identified that the managers of ECD centres are not always supportive in the implementation of the knowledge and skills that practitioners have acquired during the training. It also became evident and that they do not have the knowledge and skills needed to manage the ECD centres effectively. In this regard the following themes emerged:

### **Managers' absence**

The participants indicated that managers are often absent from the ECD centres. They contended that the managers' absence is the reason for them not being aware of limited resources for teaching and learning. A number of participants revealed that managers do not know how to teach and that this was the reason for being absent and never observing or monitoring any classes. Due to managers being absent, practitioners do not receive the support that they need.

**Supporting quotes:**

*'The owner is never around to manage the Pre-school'.*

*'The owner does not spend enough time in the school'.*

*'The owner is never at work so she/he will not be able to see what the center needs'.*

*'She is not speaking to parents, many times the owner is not at the school'.*

*'The principal is not around, she never support us'.*

**Management training**

The data made it evident that the managers lack management skills and that they are ignorant with respect to the responsibilities of a manager of an ECD centre. The participants further indicated that managers do not know how to manage, motivate or support the practitioners at their respective ECD centres.

**Supporting quotes:**

*'She is irresponsible and don't have the qualities to run an ECD center. And she has poor management skills'.*

*'No, not a good manager, not able to manage the center'.*

*'He's not running the center well'.*

*'She does not manage and motivate her staff'.*

*'She does not attain quality through everyone's commitment on a daily basis'.*

*'The owner does not care about the needs of the teacher or parent, no time management'.*

*'She is not trained for different learners who have tradition, religions, culture and beliefs'.*

*'The owner didn't make daily programme. The owner is not well trained to deal with children or manage'.*

### **Financial management**

According to the participants, managers experience numerous challenges pertaining to financial management. The participants revealed that their ECD centres are not maintained in an acceptable manner. The majority of the practitioners indicated that they do not have sufficient teaching and learning resources and that the learners are not provided with nutritious meals.

#### ***Supporting quotes:***

*'Parents don't pay school fees on time. Don't have enough money to give them nutritious food'.*

*'The children don't have enough material to learn'.*

*'I also use my pocket money to buy stationary to make it exciting'.*

*'We have no computer or office material'.*

*'Our center need maintainance and lots of renovation. We have no carpet, there is blockage of toilet and rotting of the creche's roofing. The floors need to be repaired as they are crecking and there is lack of running water'.*

### **Communication with parents**

It became clear that there is a lack of communication with the parents of learners. The data made it evident that managers do not have good communication skills and that they do not arrange parent meetings. The participants indicated that managers are afraid to speak to parents or to communicate grievances with parents because they depend on the school fees that parents have to pay.

#### **Supporting quotes:**

*'She/he do not make arrangement to meet parents as they are the one's who make payment and must tell them that money does all the things at school and that start time is from and until..... no late coming or parents should arrange after care and pay for that'.*

*'Lack of communication by not having regular meeting with parent and amongst the staff'.*

*'She is not good because she never communicate with the parents and she's always away from school'.*

*'The owner did not speaks to the parents and all the times is not at school, the owner is not responsible at all'.*

*'No meeting with parent. No communication with the parents out of order. The parents they don't want to help the home work, they don't want to bring the thing we want, eg pictures'.*

*'The owner doesn't care about the needs of the parents'.*



## **Communication with ECD practitioners**

The participants revealed that managers do not communicate with them on a regular basis. Most of the practitioners said that managers do not have good communication skills and therefore they avoided regular meetings with staff.

### ***Supporting quotes:***

*'No communication between the owner the teacher. No regular staff meeting'.*

*'Teachers cannot communicate with the owner. The owner is not responsible'.*

*'She has no communication with the staff'.*

*'Principal said I must create everything on my own'.*

*'When you ask for poster she make a fool on you by saying look for it'.*

## **Motivating staff**

The practitioners argued that the managers do not exert motivating behaviour and therefore practitioners are not always motivated to do their work. It further transpired that practitioners are not encouraged to obtain any form of ECD qualifications.

### ***Supporting quotes:***

*'She does not manage and motivate her team'.*

*'The principal at my centre say my creativity is too much for the kids'.*

*'I have attended the course. I really like to implement in my centre, but the problem is my principal she crushes everything I do'.*

*'Since I have been in the course I can do the themes, extraordinary. I do share my work with others...but I have lost my job at the creche, because I demand too much'.*

*'The things that she do at the course, they are only things that are right'.*

*'There is no trained staff'.*

Although it would be unreasonable to expect of managers to be experts in all areas of ECD, successful school managers need to be effective managers and instructional leaders (Cevher-Kalburan 2014). In the absence of effective management, early childhood development practitioners will experience difficulties in taking decisions about instructional issues. The importance of managers in managing educational activities is underscored by many researchers (Kadji-Beltran et al. 2013; Mafora and Phorabatho 2013). The manager should create a constructive educational environment; should lead the implementation of necessary changes towards effective teaching and learning; must take responsibility for providing suitable resources; and has to provide on-going professional development for practitioners (Mafora and Phorabatho 2013; Alameen and Palaiologou 2015). In a study conducted by Aubrey et al. (2013), managers of ECD centres themselves indicated that they allocate a small amount of time to administration and management. They also revealed that they had no training or experience to perform management tasks. This supports the concerns of the practitioners in this research.

Planning the teaching and learning environment is one of the most important components of successful teaching and learning. Cever-Kalburan's (2014) study also makes it evident that a lack of resources; teaching and learning material; equipment; and a lack of space are not contributing to a conducive ECD teaching and learning environment. Participants in the above study suggested that the support of families; co-operation with ECD managers; donations; and contributing basic teaching and learning materials could improve the situation at early childhood development centres. According to Mafora and Phorabatho (2013) practitioners at ECD centres experience problems (for example inadequate resources), as managers do not have the skills to manage finances. Therefore envisaged activities are not within the approved budget and the lack of relevant resources remains a major barrier towards effective teaching and learning.

In a study that focused on early childhood teacher educators and managers, concerns about communication concentrated on managers not establishing effective contact with parents (Chever-Kalburan 2014). ECD cannot be separated from families. Leadership should focus on decision-making rather than on delivering decisions that have already been made (Alameen et al. 2015). Participants in this study indicated that regular meetings with parents should be arranged as continuous communication with parents could be a solution to negative attitudes of parents towards teachers and managers. According to Alameen (2015) communication is essential to motivate and influence people to contribute to the objectives of an organisation of which parents are also members. Chever-Kalburan (2014) also states that parent-teacher communication has an influence on learners' positive attitudes towards school and that it helps parents to develop self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Cevher-Kalburhan (2014) posits that a school culture is crafted by learners, teachers and school managers. In order to achieve the goals of a school, interaction between these elements is essential. A principal cannot work in remoteness (Alameen et al.2015). It must be clear what the ECD centre's vision and ethos are and everybody must work together towards achieving these. In order to create a professional learning community, relationships between members of the staff, including the principal, must be built. Such relationships should involve a culture of trust and risk-taking (Kadji-Beltran et al. 2013; Alameen 2015). Individuals must be encouraged to contribute ideas and share examples of good practice.

Leaders must develop, implement and sustain a community that is committed to a common purpose, with common goals and outcomes. An enhanced culture and climate in which learners experience early childhood development positively will expand learner growth and performance. It can be argued that everything happens within the context of a community. Therefore, a purposeful teaching and learning community should be created to deal with the challenges and opportunities of increasing learner growth and achievement.

Influence exercised by a manager to gain support from employees is required to achieve a common goal (Aubrey et al. 2013). The data obtained from this research support the statements of Cumming et al (2015) as well as Rouse and Spradbury (2015), suggesting that practitioners should be supported to gain- or improve their qualifications and to be

engaged in ongoing professional development. Developing a capable and motivated ECD staff is critical to achieve the goals of the center. This could only happen when there is clarity and determination about not only what the ECD center should seek to achieve, but also why and how it might be achieved (Cumming 2015). Commending and inspiring practitioners are important elements in creating a positive school culture and in retaining a committed team.

## **DISCUSSION**

As part of its on-going efforts to improve the foundation phase of education in South Africa, the Department of Education is intensifying its efforts to raise awareness of- and increase access to ECD services. The South African government has acknowledged this during the past year through the importance of ECD being noted in the President's State of the Nation Address. All children do not have access to formal ECD services and many of those who do have access are not necessarily placed in an ECD centre where effective teaching and learning takes place. In this regard ECD practitioners have a role to play. Even though ECD practitioners cannot change the fact that all children do not have access to ECD services they are able to make a difference in the lives of those who have access to their centres. The majority of the participants in this research indicated that they have gained knowledge and skills and were empowered to present the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of Grade R learners. The data supports the findings of Snyder et al. (2011); Cumming et al. (2015); as well as Rouse and Spradbury (2015), Berlinski and Norbert (2015) and Askill-Williams and Murray-Harvey (2015) that revealed the positive impact of intervention programmes on the empowerment of teachers.

The development needs and challenges of poor and marginalized people play a crucial role during any form of engagement between a university and the community (Alexander et al. 2010; De Clercq and Phiri 2013; Fitzgerald and Zientek 2015). The researcher wants to support the statements of McNall (2015) by arguing that there must be co-operation between community members and a researcher when planning any intervention programme. This project provides proof of the effectiveness of a participatory approach in community engagement. The fact that the participants in this research participated in the design of the intervention programme resulted in a perception that the programme belonged to all of us. The researcher is of the opinion that this contributed to the success in the implementation of strategies to teach Grade R learners. Considering the data obtained from this research, it is

evident that ECD practitioners were empowered with knowledge, skills and strategies for teaching Grade R learners.

Masondo (2012) and Gradin (2013) argue that for most learners in townships, the standard of education is of poor quality. They further state that good education can only be accessed by the middle and elite classes in our communities. Teachers are responsible to prepare the youth for further education and for their future roles in society. There can be no successful reforms in education without the active involvement of teachers. Therefore, empowering untrained teachers and in the context of this research, ECD practitioners, on an on-going basis can never be over emphasized. The data obtained from this research are consistent with the arguments of Kartal (2007); Steyn et al. (2011) and (Gradin 2013), namely that in a country with high levels of poverty, early childhood education can play a significant role towards school-readiness. The participants in this study have improved their knowledge and skills and are able to provide higher quality education to their learners. The data further indicates that parents are more positive towards ECD practitioners and that as a result, more children are being educated at the ECD centres.

Community based ECD services is a key element in meeting the needs of young children. Every educational intervention programme aims to improve the well-being and education of learners ([Scarinci et al. 2015](#)). This intervention programme was not an exception. It is of great concern that the managers of ECD centres have such limited understanding of their management and leadership responsibilities. However, this limitation will be addressed in the next intervention project.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since 2008 a considerable degree of coherence and mutual action developed between the researcher and the participating grade R ECD practitioners. An understanding of the importance of quality teaching and learning and its value in creating more conducive teaching and learning environments for learners in township ECD centres was created. The grade R ECD practitioners implemented new ideas, new systems and new ways of doing.

As an academic, it was gratifying to work collaboratively with groups of grade R ECD practitioners. The grade R ECD practitioners indicated that they felt empowered in terms of knowledge and skills for implementing quality teaching and learning practices towards more conducive teaching and learning environments. It was also rewarding to experience the growth in their self-confidence and the ways in which they overcame their fear for rejection. The practitioners accepted that taking risks and making mistakes were part of the journey to more effective grade R teaching and learning. They were convinced that quality teaching and learning practices would mean extra work but also that it could be done with the resources that were available. As a result, they also revealed that they were more positive towards the teaching and learning of their grade R learners. The researcher realized once again that these practitioners were extremely passionate about the teaching of grade R learners.

The researcher observed that the negotiated, reflective practice impacted positively on the training and empowerment of township grade R ECD practitioners and on the education of grade R learners. This can be supported with the words of a practitioner:

*'I feel the need to change things and to be creative. Also to change the current situation, take small risks, to be prepared to make mistakes, to accept failure and to never give up.'*

However, due to a lack of management skills of managers of the ECD centres, the practitioners are faced with several obstacles in implementing quality ECD practices. Effective managers should enhance their employees' engagement and commitment towards the goals of the organisation. Managers of ECD centres should value dynamic relationships with practitioners and parents. They should motivate practitioners to perform above their own expectations. They should create a school culture and climate conducive to teaching and learning; a sound organisational structure; and committed school teams. They should further manage resources effectively and exercise good communication skills in order to foster positive relationships, as this is essential in providing quality early childhood development.

Through the findings from this research it became evident that managers of ECD centres in townships in the Vaal Triangle region of the Gauteng Province in South Africa are

often absent; have not been trained to manage an ECD centre; have limited skills to manage finances; do not communicate with parents or with the practitioners; and do not motivate practitioners to achieve goals or to improve their qualifications.

There are limitations to this research. By working in the Vaal Triangle area of the Gauteng Province only, there is a limit to the generalisability of the results. Future research could include Grade R ECD practitioners from more township ECD centres in the province. However, the researcher would argue that the aim of this intervention project, which was to empower ECD practitioners with knowledge and skills that might offer them the opportunity to earn a living, but more importantly, to care, teach and develop society's most vulnerable members, namely young children has to a great extent been realized.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the light of the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made:

ECD practitioners need to be empowered to be able to provide quality Grade R education. In this regard universities should demonstrate social responsibility by intervening in early childhood development as such interventions have the potential to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. The development needs and challenges of poor and marginalized people should play a crucial role during the engagement between universities and communities.

Knowledge and skills should not stay theoretical. It is vital to give feedback about the implementation; to support implementation; and to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context. Communities can never be used only as a means to achieve a researcher's goals. Community engagement should be based on collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions and the communities that they serve.

Universities should not under-rate and under-value the capacities of local people but should view community needs and opportunities through the eyes of the end-beneficiaries. A

two-way engagement, whereby knowledge, skills, expertise and resources required to develop and sustain a developing society is availed, should be the aim.

ECD practitioners should be recognized for the work that they do. If not, it might result in a situation where they are disregarded because they do not meet the requirements to acquire a formal qualification. The Department of Education as well as the private sector should assist ECD practitioners by providing them with the physical resources required for quality Grade R education. In order for learners to be successful, it is important that parents become more involved in the education of their children. Lines of communication should be created between the ECD practitioners and parents.

Any challenges that hinder the effective implementation of an intervention programme should be identified and addressed. Therefore, in the context of this research, a training programme aimed at empowering managers of ECD centres in townships to manage their centres effectively, will be designed and implemented in 2016.

The researcher hopes and believes that the implementation of this programme will provide a valuable guideline for managers of ECD centers who would want to attempt some changes in their institution's activities and structures.



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