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Professionalising ECCE in South Africa is not child's play! Determining skills gaps and implications for future sector development

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ABSTRACT

In line with international trends in early childhood care and education (ECCE) recognising the importance of early learning, the Department of Basic Education in South Africa has pledged to professionalise the sector, increase access and improve quality. From a systemic point of view, professionalisation of the sector will require collaboration on multiple levels between various stakeholders working in different systems to bring about simultaneous improvement in conditions of employment, resource provision, and infrastructure development. To aid the government in supporting skills development in this sector, particularly for those servicing the most indigent populations, we employed a multi-method design to determine critical skills gaps and how they could best be addressed. Data were gathered through online questionnaires, a desktop review and focus group and individual interviews. Thematic analysis revealed the need for managerial training, practical learning opportunities for practitioners, the necessity for more home-based ECCE services and systemic improvement. Based on the findings, we make suggestions of how key stakeholders could partner to best address these needs.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood development; practitioner; ECD skills development; ECD policy; ECD management

Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE (0-5 years)) is internationally recognised as vital for the future economic and social development of any country, especially if it targets the most disadvantaged families (Heckman 2012). The majority of children in South Africa come from such underprivileged circumstances. Only 58% of children aged 3–5 who live in low-income families attend a pre-school, which is about 30% less than children from more affluent homes (DBE 2022b). In total, although 1 699 000 children aged 0–4 attend some kind of early learning programme (ELP), just over four million do not (Statistics South Africa (SSA) 2022). ECCE is in itself an important vehicle for reducing such structural inequalities. Brooks et al. (2022, 1) highlight it as a strategy to build South Africa's social infrastructure and bring multiple benefits to black women 'by providing decent jobs, advancing gender equity and stimulating the

local economy'. Quality childcare also enables more women, as primary caregivers, to enter the labour market. In the long term ECCE also brings benefits in related fields such as reduction in health, social services and welfare spending, and reduced poverty-related crime (Daviaud et al. 2018; De Henau et al. 2019). Given that subsequent schooling opportunities are similar, children who receive quality ECCE are more likely to complete their education, have higher earning potential later in life, and an overall improved quality of life (Garcia et al. 2021).

ECCE is therefore a developmental priority in South Africa as stated in the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 2015). However, access is not the only concern of the government – improving the quality of services is equally important (Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022a). The ECCE sector is mostly privately run, and therefore difficult to regulate and monitor in terms of quality. For this reason, the DBE conducted a national census (DBE 2022a) of children 0–5 years to determine the current nature and extent of services, as a baseline for moving towards gradual professionalisation of the sector. The Thrive by Five report commissioned by the DBE prior to the national census (Giese et al. 2022) among children aged 4–5, found that less than half are meeting the developmental outcomes appropriate to their age; 27% are falling behind and 28.3% are falling far behind. These figures raise concern about the quality of ECCE delivered to the majority of children whose parents cannot afford to pay the high fees demanded by the better resourced centres (Giese et al. 2022). This implies that many children will enter formal schooling at age six with barriers to learning due to insufficient or low-quality early stimulation and education. Since the quality of formal schooling is also poor in rural and township contexts, lack of ECCE exposure just adds another layer of complexity to the problem.

The ECCE sector is mostly privatised and less than half of the services receive a small subsidy from government to provide for operating expenses (DBE 2022). Increased regulation of the ECCE sector will require a multi-sectoral and multi-systemic approach, and while improved administration is not a guarantee of improved quality, in a sector where there is currently little structure, it is seen by government as an important first step. In line with the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) (RSA 2013), the government is committed to supporting skills development in this sector, particularly for those servicing the most indigent populations. The early childhood development (ECD) sector is thus positioned as a priority area that could provide much needed jobs for the rising number of unemployed. The challenge of making quality ECCE available to all is one that will create greater demand for qualified personnel in the future and thus increases the need for opportunities for skills development. Before the government can begin to professionalise the sector, through the development of a qualification framework, an education management system, norms and standards for teachers and structures for ongoing professional development, and other regulatory means, it is first necessary to determine the current status and future developmental needs of practitioners and managers in low-income communities. Here we report on research conducted for this purpose. The research was funded by the ETDP SETA (a governmental body that supports skills development in the Education sector) to identify ways to support the government in its aim to improve the quality of ECCE available in township and rural areas. The research was guided by the question: 'What are current skills gaps in the ECCE sector and how can these be addressed to support the move towards professionalisation?' We first provide

an overview of the sector from a systemic theoretical viewpoint, before explaining the methodology used to conduct the research. Then we present the findings and implications for skills development in response to the research question.

A systemic view of the ECCE sector

Any attempt to improve ECCE services must be holistic in nature, as health and social development are inextricably intertwined with the education and cognitive development of the child. Holistic ECCE includes the provision of physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual development opportunities from birth to primary school entry in formal and informal settings (Cantor et al. 2021). Thus, the government is adopting an intersectoral approach to ECCE which requires close collaboration between health, social development and treasury, as well as ‘civil society, the corporate sector, religious organisations, nongovernmental organisations, and parents’ (Motshekga 2022, 1). The ECCE sector is therefore a complex system in itself and we acknowledge that skills development. General systems theory (Jackson 2019) seeks to explain such complexity by acknowledging the interconnections and mutual influence among various micro, meso and macro systems. In the context of early childhood development, the systems include the child, the family, the community, and the various interdependent systems and services that support or hinder their development. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model (MacBlain 2022) is a theoretical lens often used to view how different systems influence the development of the young child and how the child in turn influences its environment. Bronfenbrenner understood the practical issues faced by families of young children living in difficult circumstances (Tudge et al. 2021) indicating that poverty needs to be stopped ‘where it hits first and most damagingly – in early childhood’ (Tregaskis 2015, 14). Bronfenbrenner warned that poverty and stressful living conditions negatively affect interaction between parent–child and child and environment (Bronfenbrenner 1992) and that the environmental context determines much of the developmental opportunities of the child. Figure 1 indicates how the access to quality ECCE of the young child in the centre is dependent on multiple factors.

All the factors indicated in Figure 1 (and more besides), are systems in themselves that interact to influence ECCE positively or negatively. For example, a child living in poverty will have less access to health and welfare services than their more privileged peers, notwithstanding the fact that food insecurity and related social problems increase the need for such support. Stolz (2021) indicates that almost a third of South African children are affected by inadequate nutrition, which could be offset by equitable access to holistic ECCE, yet these are the very children denied it. So, although policy and ideology in South Africa currently champion ECCE (RSA 2015), the government faces a difficult task to regulate, support and ultimately professionalise the sector due to the negative influence of other local and global systems.

The main lesson that systems theory offers for professionalisation of the ECCE sector, is that skills development of practitioners and management alone will not be sufficient to bring about transformation towards a more socially just ECCE sector that meets the developmental needs of all children. Such transformation and professionalisation will require collaboration on multiple levels between various stakeholders working in different systems to bring about improvement in conditions of employment, resource

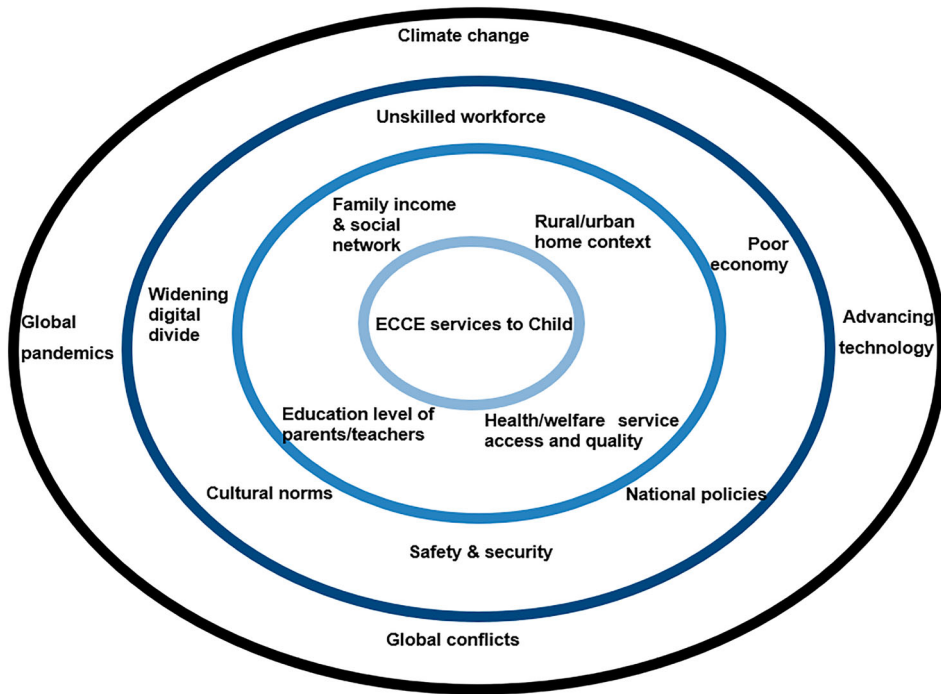


Figure 1. Systemic factors influencing ECCE.

provision, and infrastructure development. Of course, the quality of later schooling also needs to be improved if the gains in ECCE are to be sustained. However, change has to start somewhere. This research attempted to identify the need for skills development to contribute to this process of transformation. We now explain the methodology used to generate this knowledge.

Methodology

The multi-method qualitative research design (Mik-Meyer 2020) consisted of a desktop review, supplemented by open-ended questionnaires administered online to have a greater reach, and qualitative individual and focus group interviews, conducted both face-to-face and virtually, depending on the availability of the respondent. Table 1 provides an overview of the method, respondents and purpose of the method.

The *desktop review* was conducted first to determine the labour market profile from both grey and peer reviewed literature and policy documents relevant to the ECCE sector. To supplement this data, primarily qualitative online surveys were conducted by means of open-ended questionnaires via google docs. Survey 1 was conducted to gather data from personnel in the sector working in the official departments/councils/associations responsible for ECCE at national, provincial and local levels. Survey 2 was conducted to determine what ECCE qualifications are/will be offered at the various training institutions, as well as the throughput trends to provide data about the future supply of labour. To deepen understanding of the skills development gaps of those actually

Table 1. Overview of research methods.

Research method	Respondents	Purpose of method
Desktop review	Sources consulted: 54 (policies, articles, reports).	To determine the nature and extent of sector, employer/employee profile, emerging trends and best current practices.
Online Survey 1	52 respondents comprising (Government officials, non-profit organisations (NPO), South African Council for Educators (SACE), resource and training organisations (RTO)).	To determine skills gaps and training needs; what partnerships respondents recommend to address skills gaps.
Online Survey 2	19 respondents: Universities/Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)s public and private, offering/developing ECCE programmes and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).	Online/telephonic survey to determine status of supply of qualified employees in terms of qualifications offered, enrolments, throughput, and problems experienced.
Face-to-face or virtual interviews	2 focus groups with managers (15 participants) 4 individual interviews with managers and 3 with NPO personnel.	To determine issues related to labour supply and demand and skills shortages/needs on ground level.

delivering services in the sector, focus group and individual interviews were conducted to determine the challenges they are facing and their ideas of how the challenges could be addressed through skills development. These semi-structured interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim to enable *thematic analysis* using AtlasTi. The data from the electronic surveys was analysed in response to the questions posed, and via descriptive statistics where appropriate. Each respondent indicated which key stakeholder they represented and their role, but no other personal information was gathered to protect anonymity. Trustworthiness of the data was enhanced by member checking where possible and by having collaborating researchers review the findings. *Ethical approval* was granted by the appropriate ethical committee (NWU-01039-21-A2). All respondents signed an informed consent form, either electronically or in person, which informed them that all data would remain anonymous, and that they could at any stage retract their permission for the data to be used for the purposes of the research.

Discussion of findings

The themes presented below emerged in answer to the research question, ‘What are the current skills gaps in the ECD workforce and how can these be addressed to support the move towards professionalisation?’ This question was determined by the brief given to the ETDP SETA research Chair.

Theme 1 Centre managers are struggling: ‘I want to create a professional environment, but I don’t know how!’

To professionalise and regulate the sector, as per the aims of the NIECDP (RSA 2015), more centres need to be registered to enable the DBE to provide funding and quality control. Unregistered ECCE operators (circa 56%) outnumber those who are registered (approx. 40%) (DBE 2022), and without registration, the sector will remain informal and more vulnerable to negative economic and social impacts. To meet the diverse needs of practitioners, learners and parents, centre heads need to display strong leadership skills

to enable a positive work environment, a culture of learning and improvement, and shared decision making (Rodd 2020). Research conducted by Mulovhedzi (2022) indicated that many centre heads were lacking in appropriate leadership and management skills, while Ronaasen (2021) identified the need to train and support ECD managers in business planning, mentorship, financial and ECD principal management tasks. This is not surprising, given that most centre managers initiated their ELP business as a means of providing income, rather than because they had trained for the field. These findings were validated by the data collected for this study. Managerial skills were considered a vital area for development.

Figure 2, which includes responses from stakeholders active in directing and supporting the sector, indicates that general management and leadership skills (69.2%), as well as more specific skills such as financial (57.7%) and record management (42.7%), were most needed, a finding confirmed by the centre managers:

Whole time we deal with finances. I am everything – bank manager, treasurer, trainer, counsellor, mentor, but no one taught me this. (FG1, 1)

The ECD sector has provided a much-needed business opportunity for women in township and rural areas to enable parents to participate in the labour market (Mampane 2021). However, these entrepreneurs have seldom been trained to run a business and so the professionalisation of the sector brings challenges for them. Computer literacy, needed to respond to the increasing requirements to register their centres, as well as to complete the various reports that the gradual regulation of the sector will entail,

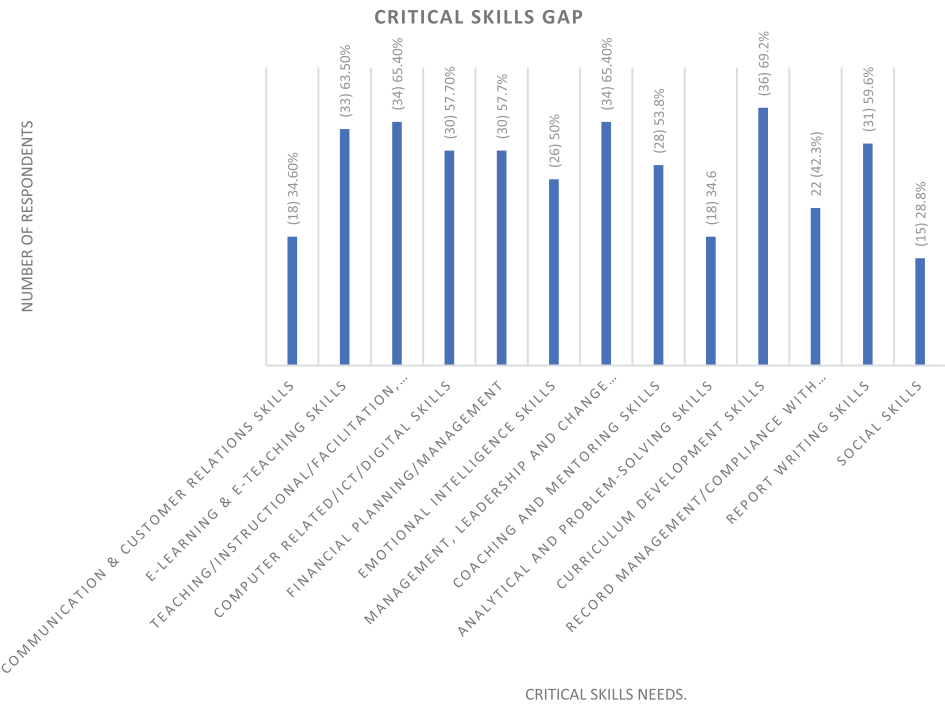


Figure 2. Critical skills gaps in ECCE sector.

was considered a vital skill for all, but ‘we don’t have computers and we don’t even know how to use them if we did!’ (FG1, 3). As one manager indicated,

We are expected to be professional, but we need to learn how to write reports, how to speak in meetings in a professional way. (FG2, 3)

Communication, emotional intelligence and other social skills were identified as essential to deal with the various government departments, social workers and parents. These skills do not normally form part of the NQF 4 and 5 qualifications for ECD, but without them the managers felt that they could not ‘cope with all the demands’ (FG2, 4). When asked what kind of training they would prefer, they indicated that practical workshops followed up by support would be best, given that they do not have time to attend courses and many thought that they would not benefit from doing a long course at higher education, as they needed more practical training. Respondents to the survey also stressed that monitoring and evaluation of training, together with follow-up mentoring, is essential to ensure that learning is implemented in practice. Since the managers are working full-time and most are not computer-literate, both contact and distance learning would be problematic for them, therefore local training and support were preferred. We were struck by the passion and commitment of the managers interviewed, with many of them doing good work with very little support or resources. Evidently, those who were affiliated to a philanthropic organisation or NPO were able to provide a better quality of education and working environment, but these were in the minority and most centres had to struggle to remain operational. Part of their struggles was the inability to attract and retain qualified practitioners.

Theme 2: Practitioners need practical training: ‘Those who go to school, come back the same’

Centre managers indicated they faced several staffing challenges. The National Curriculum Framework for ECD requires them to be competent in facilitating play-based learning (DBE 2015) and few of them have been trained in that aspect or in how to develop appropriate lesson themes and plans for ECCE. One centre admitted to using Grade R materials (5-6 years), supplied by the DBE, for the three – and four-year-olds, since they did not know how to create age-appropriate lessons on their own. Now that the function of ECD has shifted to the DBE, a priority is the creation of a human resource development plan (Kotzé 2022). However, a significant skills deficiency currently exists among the 48.6% of practitioners who do not hold an accredited qualification (DBE 2022). Even those with the required NQF Level 4, and especially those who had done Educare courses at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and private institutions, did not or could not translate their knowledge into practice. Most centre managers complained about this, with one stating that they had had to install cameras in the classrooms to monitor the practitioners, as otherwise they would just ‘be on their phones’ (FG1, 1). They said that any training for practitioners would need to be ‘free, because they have no money’ (FG2, 6) and they actually preferred workshops since,

With level 4, she will go to school but there will be no change in teaching the kids. With workshops they come back and implement what they learn, make a plan for the week. Now I have to do this for them. (FG2, 7)

They complained of a high staff turnover, as practitioners would leave as soon as a better paying opportunity came up, or just because they would prefer to be at home than work for so little. Managers confirmed the findings of the census (DBE 2022) that most practitioners received less than minimum wage, with salaries ranging from R1200 to R3800 per month. None of the managers interviewed could afford to pay any benefits or even contribute to the unemployment fund – in reality, the practitioners were employed on a casual basis with no binding contracts of employment in place. They wanted young people to enter ECCE, but they could not attract quality candidates due to the poor conditions of work:

Young people, you cannot even trust them. They don't care. We want them cos they bring new ideas, they are wiser in technology but they don't stay. (FG1, 1)

One innovative manager suggested that it would be helpful if a few centres could join together and employ one human resource or financial person to work for them all and take this burden from the centre managers. Some of the centres had up to 15 employees, so the human resource task was considerable. Other managers complained about employees leaving soon after being supported to gain a qualification. When they complained about this to government officials at a DBE workshop, 'they suggested we draw up a contract to bind them to work for us for at least 3 years, but oh...how can we do that? We cannot afford lawyers...' (FG2, 7). They felt that this response indicated that the Government 'did not know what we are really up against' (FG2, 10).

Figure 2 indicates a high need for e-learning, teaching and curriculum development skills (all over 60%). Managers reiterated the need for training in play-based learning and lesson planning. They did their best to train staff, but felt they needed an expert as most of them only had NQF Level 4 themselves. One manager (FG1, 3) shared that she used Google to find lessons and materials; others said they had weekly planning meetings where they shared ideas and resources, but that was mostly at the larger centres supported by NPOs or philanthropic organisations.

The respondents to the survey also indicated that training has to be practical and onsite support is vital to ensure quality outcomes. However, one respondent from Higher Education complained that the DHET was insisting that the NQF 5 Level Certificate in ECCE be made 'more theoretical' before they could approve it. Although the qualification framework is much needed to create a career path for ECCE practitioners, it appears that the institutions may be forced to focus more on academic rather than practical training. Academic support and mentorship will be vital elements in relation to the diploma and degree, as most of the students will not have been exposed to academic demands and environments before (Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care & Education (PIECCE) 2019). Due to the low qualification base of the sector, recognition of prior learning (RPL) will be essential to enable practitioners to improve their qualifications (SACE 2019) but even with an NQF Level 4 or 5 qualification and years of experience, many universities will still not admit practitioners into a degree programme, despite RPL policies being in place. Another critical skills gap is the fact that parents do not fully understand the need for child stimulation, and still see the centres as places for child care when they are at work.

Theme 3: The need for home-based care and stimulation: ‘Parents don’t understand what it is all about’

The centre managers said they struggle to get parental support for ECCE.

We need a better way to engage with parents, they need to understand our programme better. Most are teenage mums, who think ECD is to do with US, not them. I don’t know what to do to attract them. (Int.2)

Optimal child development requires parents to support what is learnt at school, as well as provide opportunities for holistic development (Albanese, Russo, and Geller 2019). However, the increasing economic poverty and accompanying social ills in South Africa mean that often homes are not very conducive to healthy child development (Justice et al. 2019; Şengönül 2021). Around 1 in 4 children in South Africa are stunted, which affects physical, cognitive and brain development (United Nations Childrens Fund 2021). Cultural norms also tend to place the task of educating the child in the lap of the teacher (Wolf 2020). Systemic injustices such as poverty and cultural and social norms and problems in South Africa impact negatively on all other systems, including ECCE. In 2021, only 18.1% of children in the lowest income group attended ECCE, as opposed to 60.3% in the highest income groups (SSA 2022) implying that there is an urgent need to educate parents who cannot afford to enrol children in private centres, to provide holistic stimulation at home (Matlhape and Hickman 2019). Centre managers indicated that parents often stop paying in October, presumably to save for Christmas, and then only recommence in February. According to one manager, parents still send their children to the centre as they ‘know their child will get 3 meals even if they do not pay’ (FG1, 1). They also told of cases where parents shift children to another centre to avoid confrontation over fees. While there is endemic poverty and continued privatisation of ECCE, these issues will not be readily solved, therefore it makes sense to provide more opportunities and training for home-based care and stimulation. The sustainability of existing ECCE centres is also very fragile, for reasons discussed in the next theme.

Theme 4: Systemic lack of support: ‘They told us we must fundraise!’

This theme concerns the lack of systemic support for ECCE as perceived by the centre managers. While the government has the political will to improve access to and quality of ECCE to all children whose parents wish them to attend, in reality systemic change is a slow and difficult process. In the meantime, those on the ground feel that, ‘The government does not support us, they do not see us’ (FG2, 5). When attending a workshop with provincial government, centre managers were told to “fundraise and look for donations, we are not sure if funding will come” – but how can we when parents are so poor?’ (FG1, 2). The government subsidy only covers 27% of the centre’s need on average, the rest must come from fees paid by parents but unemployment and the cost of living are rising simultaneously, meaning that this source of income is not sustainable. As already indicated, less than half of centres are registered, so most do not even receive this small subsidy. Centre managers try to adopt a no-fee policy for some children, but this is unsustainable as the number grows each year. After paying for food for the children, there is little left over to pay staff salaries,

hence the difficulty in recruiting and retaining any staff, never mind those with appropriate qualifications and attitudes. Even Grade R teachers with a university diploma are paid below R5000 in some cases since the subsidy is given to the School Governing Bodies to cover Grade R expenses, therefore staff are not paid directly by the DBE. Another problem is that they are often not paid the correct per child subsidy. As one manager said:

I have a certificate from the Department of Health to cover the 250 children that my premises holds, but I only receive subsidy for 180 from DSD – thus the R17 per child is diluted and I have to feed them all on that small amount. (FG2, 4)

There were endless complaints about the difficulty in registering their centres with the various departments. For example, they would attain clearances from tax and health but when they submitted their files to the municipality ('we have to do a document of 37 pages!' [FG2, 11]), they would be told after three months that their files had been lost and could they please start again? This causes endless frustration and wastes precious time and money. It is evident that the current system of approval and funding is not working, and although the DBE is in the process of making it easier, unless there is a coordinating body at local level, difficulties will remain. One manager (FG1, 1) indicated that she has started a forum for creches in a particular municipality because,

No-one comes to us, the Dept don't care, the society don't care. The social workers just harass us about regulations, they do not keep their promise to help us. There was no forum where we could talk. People need to see us.

The problems highlighted in these themes give rise to some critical questions and implications for skills development and training, as discussed in the following section.

Critical questions emerging from the findings and implications for skills planning and development

Viewed from a systemic perspective, the findings indicate that the challenges facing the sector are multi-faceted and complex. To provide quality ECCE, critical questions need to be answered, such as, how can we make ECCE services more sustainable? How can we make ECCE accessible to those in the lowest income brackets? How can the sector attract and retain qualified staff? Although this paper focuses on identifying the workforce development required to improve the quality of ECCE services, training alone will not result in the necessary transformations.

It was apparent from the responses to the surveys that there is existing knowledge, expertise and capacity within the sector that government could draw on to reach its goal of professionalisation. There were many suggestions that government could engage with ECD forums, large NPOs and associations such as NECDA, Bridge, Ntataise, SA ECD Forum and others since they are most aware of what is needed to professionalise the sector. Several respondents also said that partnerships need to be ongoing and outcomes/results should be tracked to improve accountability. These forums are best placed to identify which NPOs and resource and training organisations (RTOs) are working in which areas, again with a focus on helping the most vulnerable and least served communities. Almost all respondents highlighted the need to expand partnerships with key

stakeholders to upskill practitioners and managers currently working in the field but who do not hold the required qualifications.

Although we repeat that improving ECCE opportunities for all children ultimately depends on concomitant social and economic change, skills development of the workforce is perhaps an easy entry point. Based on the knowledge generated from this study, we now make a few deductions as to how skills development could be approached within a complex and economically challenged environment.

Increasing home and community based ECCE. To increase accessibility to ECCE for the poorest children, home- and community-based early childhood development programmes, unlike ECD centres, can be set up quickly and easily in existing homes without having to fulfil official regulations. In addition, local NPOs and/or centre managers could train parents how to stimulate their children at home at no cost, thereby improving developmental outcomes. As Matlhape and Hickman (2019, 1) argue,

The government therefore needs to go beyond merely tolerating home and community based ECD programmes in the system, and instead adopt funding strategies that encourage this essential provision that helps to build quality.

Such strategies would be in line with national policy to improve the lives of women, children and the most disadvantaged as outlined in the NDP 2030 (RSA 2013). Again, this would require collaboration and partnerships between government and civil society and between various governmental funding agencies. However, quality ECCE is ultimately dependent on a well-qualified workforce.

Developing a skilled workforce. With almost half of the workforce not holding the minimum qualifications to provide ECCE services, there is a pressing need to provide immediate, practical training from a zero base to enable them to develop appropriate lesson plans and meet the early learning developmental outcomes. At the same time, focus should be given to helping practitioners to complete NQF Level 4 and 5 to enable access to higher education (HE) through partnerships with TVETs and private RTOs offering the level 4 and 5 qualifications in ECD. Partnerships with established training organisations, who are already providing innovative solutions in the sector, will enable upskilling at these lower levels, while ongoing bursary support from ETDP SETA, provincial DBE and the Department of Higher Education, will open up access to the diplomas and degrees offered by HE. However, according to the findings presented above, the focus should be on developing capacity for practical implementation of learning, and not just attaining a qualification/certificate. Ongoing support of students can be done by partnerships between RTOs and government or educational institutions. An example of one such collaboration is exemplified by the Sivalithuli project (Midlands Community College (MCC)) and Training and Resources in Early Education (TREE) which was developed to bridge the gap between NQF 4 and 5 Level programmes and the academic demands of the new university level diplomas and degrees. The partners developed a six-month course to equip students with academic skills and negotiated with a leading university to enable successful graduates to enter the Diploma in ECCE at level 6. This will help to fast track the provision of qualified personnel for ECCE, as the partners will mentor these students and provide workplace experience to enable completion within the required time. Successful students will then be able to enter the second year of the three-year ECCE degree programme. Professionalisation of the workforce

however will take time, as most of these programmes will only begin in 2024 or 2025. In the meantime, on the ground support for practitioners is essential and this is best delivered by the many NPOs that already are delivering excellent programmes, but in partnership with the DBE so that they are recognised to allow practitioners to build up credits towards an accredited qualification.

Improving the sustainability of centre-based ECCE. In 2001, the Department of Education stated that ECD requires ‘an integrated, cross-sectoral approach and plan across government that involves civil society organisations, the corporate sector, religious organisations, non-governmental organisations, parents, children and adolescents’ (Department of Education 2001, 1). Partnerships are vital to increase access to and the quality of ECD, in line with policy mandates. Twenty-two years later the sector still appears to be struggling to form effective partnerships, according to the respondents in this study. The DBE has initiated some partnerships with NPOs (e.g. SmartStart and Ntataise) and philanthropic organisations (e.g. Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund), but there is scope for much more collaboration within the sector. ECCE is largely privatised, and although an intersectoral committee has been set up at national government level, collaboration is not so evident on the ground. Problems with registration continue despite small changes to the system, since local role players do not fulfil their responsibilities. ECD remains absent from the Integrated Development Plans of most municipalities, something that the advocacy group Real Reform ECD (see <https://www.ecdreform.org.za/>) is trying to address. The human resource systems and management information systems that DBE and partner departments are developing will most likely require online responses, therefore managers will need to be trained in computer literacy and the various software packages that could lighten their administrative burdens. Computer literacy would also enable managers and practitioners to access helpful resources from the internet and use AI applications to help with administration. We were told that, to date, workshops for managers have tended to focus on developing their capacity to fulfil the regulatory requirements for registration, rather than on listening to their development needs as voiced in this paper – the need for social skills, human resource and leadership skills, emotional intelligence and communication skills as well as the usual budgeting, report writing and record management skills. Since ECD has potential to create much-needed jobs, these entrepreneurs need to be supported to grow their businesses. Social enterprises such as Smart Start and GROW do provide such support and training, but more of this needs to be done on a national level, funded by government and partnerships with philanthropic trusts and local business.

Conclusion

The findings deduced from this research have indicated critical skills gaps in the ECCE sector and based on these, we have made some suggestions of how they can be addressed. However, the quality of and access to ECCE is influenced by various systems, meaning that ultimately positive transformation towards a high quality, regulated and professional system will depend on concomitant social and economic transformation. The sustainability of the current privatised and thus economically vulnerable sector serving the most disadvantaged children is questionable without an improvement in either the economy or levels of government funding. While the DBE is working hard to realise

this, there exists much expertise in the form of the NPOs, parents, local government, centre managers and practitioners which could be harnessed through collaboration at local level to address the different training needs voiced in this paper. We end by quoting Bronfenbrenner (1992, 6) regarding the value of a systemic approach to local collaborations to enhance child development. ‘... bridges cannot be built solely by constructing abutments on one shore. In each case, the people and the programs on the other shore must collaborate in the joint venture’. This involves, he argued, ‘building mutual trust, and mutual support, not only between the family and other developmental settings, but between both of these and the communities in which they exist’.

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