Quality Early Childhood Education Enhancement Through Teachers' Qualification and Training in South Africa

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The European Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Four was on the provision of quality education for all. The meaning of quality education has been controversial among authors. However, studies on early childhood education conclude that to have quality education for young children two indicators must be available – structural and process indicators. This study aimed at exploring how early childhood education centres' practitioners' qualifications and training promote quality education for young children. Six participants (three ECD principals and three ECD practitioners) were selected from the three-township early childhood development centres in Kwazulu-Natal Province, South Africa. An interpretive, qualitative research approach was chosen. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, which was then analysed thematically. The findings indicate that the practitioners are aware of the importance of having gained the knowledge and skills to teach young children through the earning of qualifications and how it would improve the quality of teaching. The findings also show the challenges that hinder practitioners from acquiring ECE qualifications and training. Therefore, it is recommended that higher learning institutions develop a practical programme to enhance practitioners' educational experiences, with funding from the government and international scholarship.

Keywords: Quality Early Childhood Education, Qualification, Training, ECE practitioners

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Introduction

Quality Early Childhood Education Indicators

Governments all around the world as well as international organizations have acknowledged the value of high-quality education and have put emphasis on it. The provision of quality education for students is one of the 2023 Sustainable Development Goal's main objectives (SDG 4) to end poverty, safeguard the environment, and ensure that everyone has access to freedom and peace by 2030 (de Villiers et al., 2021). To guarantee that every child and citizen has access to quality education, UNESCO encourages national links, cultural legacies, and the equality of all nations (Addey, 2021). Van der Gaag and Putcha, (2015) expanded on quality education by saying quality Early childhood Education (ECE) is essential for safeguarding children from a wide range of socioeconomic difficulties, including subpar living conditions, a lack of educational opportunities, and inadequate health care. In addition, Moore, Qaissaunee and Sherretz (2019) also echo that quality education for young children is essential for raising academic standards, health and employment prospects, eradicating poverty and inequities, and enhancing opportunities for future employment. The novel aspect is that there is a strong emphasis on achieving quality education; however, difficulties can arise when defining quality and describing how crucial indicators would promote quality education.

According to Myers (2010), it can be a challenging and contentious subject to describe quality early childhood education metrics, especially when one considers the uneven distribution of resources. However, researchers on early childhood education have found that two indicators, known as structural and process indicators, are necessary for young children to receive a quality education (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014; Bonetti & Brown 2018). Structural quality is referred to as input that is easily observed and measurable in determining quality such as ECD centre facilities\resources, ECD practitioner-to-child ratio, and ECD practitioner qualifications, training and wages (Bonetti & Brown, 2018; Slot, Leseman, Verhagen, & Mulder, 2015). Process quality is described as the nature of interactions between children and teachers, among children, and among adults — practitioners, parents, and staff, and the nature of leadership and pedagogy (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014). This study sought to understand how early childhood education centres' practitioners' qualifications and training promote high-quality education for young children since ECE teachers' qualifications and training are one of the structural quality indicators.

ECE Teachers' Qualification as a Quality Indicator

The education and training that ECE instructors receive are crucial in the pursuit of good teaching standards that should improve students' math and language abilities during the initial years of schooling (Myers, 2006). Gashaw (2014) added that it is critical that ECD educators and practitioners obtain current information and abilities about children's development. As such, the South African Qualifications Authority (2007) offers several accredited qualifications for ECE practitioners, particularly those who work directly with children, as well as community development qualifications with ECE specialists that cater to the needs of practitioners who work directly with parents. Nevertheless, researchers found that a significant number of ECE teachers did not have appropriate qualifications in a national study that included assessing the quality of ECD teachers (DSD & EPRI, 2014). Biersteker et al. (2016) argue that ECE teachers' qualifications may not always indicate increased children's achievement or higher-quality instruction in the classroom. Hence, it is important to

understand how ECE teachers' qualification promotes quality early childhood education from the practitioners' perception.

ECE Teachers' Training as a Quality Indicator

Would ECE teachers' training and development promote quality ECE if their qualifications did not necessarily affect the ECCE's quality? Specialized training programs for ECD teachers, according to Fukkink and Lont (2007), can greatly raise teacher skills and hence raise promote quality ECE. Similarly, Biersteker et al. (2016), emphasise that ECE teacher training is generally used as a quality indicator. As a result, the South African, Department of Basic Education [DBE] and Department of Social Development [DSD] mandate that ECE teachers receive the necessary training (RSA, 2014). Furthermore, ARNEC (2011) states that ECE teachers' training programs should be participatory to include parents, families, and community members. Therefore, practical training should be provided by delivering empowering programs for all stakeholders and should include pre-service and in-service training as well as ongoing support and guidance.

The objective of this study is to explore how township South African early childhood education centres' teachers' qualifications and training promote quality education for young children. The research question to achieve this objective is "*How do ECE teachers' qualifications and training promote quality early childhood education in South Africa?*" The results of this study are meant to fill information gaps regarding quality early childhood education and teachers' qualifications and training. Along with details on achieving one of the Sustainable Development Goals set forth by the United Nations in 2030. As a result, this study is well-positioned to offer practical suggestions to ECE practitioners and decision-makers.

Methodology

An interpretative research paradigm with a qualitative technique was employed to explore ECE teachers' credentials and training in promoting high-quality early education since it allows for a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the research question Creswell (2014). In order to better comprehend the research phenomenon from many perspectives, a multiple case study research approach was used (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three ECE principals and three ECE practitioners were chosen from three-township ECE centres in the Kwazulu-Natal Province, South Africa, using the purposive sampling technique. In Table 1, participant profiles are displayed.

ECE centres	Pseudonyms	Rank within the ECE Center	Highest qualification	Years of experience
Vine	Apple	Principal	No qualification	16 years
Vine	Mango	Teacher	Diploma in ECE	5 years
Delta	Orange	Principal	Certificate in ECE	12years
Delta	Banana	Teacher	Diploma in ECE	8years
Lee	Grapes	Principal	No qualification	10 years
Lee	Berry	Teacher	Certificate in ECE	4 years

Table 1: Participants' Profile

At the participants' centre, data was gathered through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. To provide information for reliability tests, the interview sessions were audio-recorded and transcriptions were made. The generated data were coded and classified thematically into themes that arose from the data. Before any data is collected, consent forms are signed by all participants and the study's purpose is communicated to them in order to uphold ethical standards. Permission to conduct research was also acquired from the centre's directors.

Findings and Discussion

The subheadings below illustrate two themes that emerged as a result of the data analysis.

Factors of ECE Teachers' Qualifications and Skills as a Quality Indicator

The findings showed that the qualification and expertise of ECE teachers are crucial and would raise the quality of education and care given to young children. The data reveals the factors that indicate signs of quality enhancement at the participating centres. For example, participants (ECE principals) described the improvement in children's performance after employing teachers with ECE qualifications and also enrolling them in training sessions. Participated ECE teachers also state that the knowledge acquired from their education helped them to apply learning resources in the growth and development of the children. As a result, from teachers' qualifications and training, indications of ECE quality include factors like children's overall growth, teachers' confidence in connecting with children, and teachers' increased skills. Below is the verbatim of the participants' narrations.

> **Mango:** *Before I obtained my Diploma in ECE, I do not have the understanding that outdoor learning resources should be used to engage and build children's physical, mental and social skills through play. With my ECE qualification, my work with young children has really improved I can say.*

> **Banana:** *ECE qualification is even more important to teach children now than before because from it you will learn more new things and also meet people that can help you with information and materials.*

> **Berry:** *By attending short courses and training, I improve my skills on how to teach the children in my class. So regular training is an important thing to improve the quality of our work as children's teachers.*

> **Apple:** *I do not have the opportunity to go to college to learn about my job as the head of my centre but I have gathered a lot of knowledge from my years of experience in attending several trainings. If I hear of any training I register myself and my teachers because I know that it will help a lot in teaching the children in our school.*

> **Orange:** *As the principal of the centre, I can tell you from the feedback of parents about children with a qualified teacher and those without a qualified teacher. Although it is expensive to employ qualified teachers but qualified teachers help with a lot of things in children's growth and development.*

The findings agree with Zulu et al., (2022) which indicate that for practitioners to provide young children with high-quality teaching and learning, there is a need for some sort of advanced training in ECD. The study's findings also concur with those of Thao and Boyd (2014), who found that certified ECE teachers are generally comfortable presenting and putting new concepts into practice. However, the findings disagree with Biersteker et al. (2016) who state that ECE teachers' qualifications may not always indicate increased higher-quality instruction in the classroom. Despite the findings demonstrating the importance of ECE qualifications as an indicator to improve the quality of teaching, participants talked about the barriers that keep them from obtaining ECE training and qualifications. These barriers are discussed in the theme below.

Obstacles That Prevent ECE Practitioners From Obtaining ECE Qualification

The study found that obstacles such as a lack of funding, a heavy workload, a lack of flexibility with their schedules, and a lack of understanding of distance learning prevent ECE teachers from completing an early childhood certificate, diploma, or degree. These were described by the participants in the following way.

> **Apple:** *Honestly, I like to go to school to learn more and obtain a qualification but I can't afford it. College or University education is expensive for us. Another problem that I have is also the time to study is not there for me.*

> **Grapes:** *I started this centre because of my love for young children not because I have a qualification, I enrolled on a certificate programme before but the workload and my family responsibility do not allow me to complete the program.*

> **Berry:** *I obtained my diploma in ECE two years ago and my plan is to proceed to obtain a degree so that I can earn more but the challenge is that I need sponsorship, my salary here is not enough to sponsor myself for a degree program.*

> **Orange and Banana:** *Stated their fear of coping with distance education because of their limited knowledge of technology and online learning.*

In South Africa, ECE teachers are urged to obtain at least the minimum qualifications outlined in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (South African Qualifications Authority, 2007). The findings of this study indicate a contrary outlook due to some factors

like a lack of funds, a demanding workload, an inability to be flexible with their schedules, and a lack of knowledge of distance learning which prevents the participants of this study. According to Shaeffer (2015), bad working conditions, low pay, and long hours are obstacles for ECE teachers, and these factors, along with a hard workload, make it difficult for them to obtain qualifications. This implies that, despite ECE teachers' recognition of qualifications and training as an ECE quality indicator, the quality of education provided may suffer since the teachers were unable to obtain the necessary training and qualifications.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In the attempt to answer the research question 'How do ECE teachers' qualifications and training promote quality early childhood education in South Africa', findings reveal teachers are aware of the importance of having gained the knowledge and skills to teach young children through the earning of qualifications and how it would improve the quality of teaching. The findings also show the challenges that hinder teachers from acquiring ECE qualifications and training. Therefore, it is recommended that higher learning institutions develop a practical programme to enhance practitioners' educational experiences, with funding from the government and international scholarship. It is also recommended that the Government, NGOs, universities and private organisations offer flexible ECE training.

As a result of the study's restriction to township ECD centres in South Africa's Kwazulu-Natal Province, its limitations are mostly related to the generalizability of its findings. A larger sample size and other data collection techniques might have helped to produce deeper conclusions, but the study's time constraint does not allow for that. The researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to overcome this constraint.

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