

Open Distance Learning Community Engagement: Identifying the Needs of a Community School

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ABSTRACT A dysfunctional early childhood development (ECD) school will have a direct negative effect on the teaching and learning activities of the children attending it on their development. The objective was to determine the needs and challenges of a community school in order to determine what role lecturers at Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions could play as part of their community engagement in transforming a dysfunctional school into a functional school. A qualitative research design was applied to obtain answers to the research questions and semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from four staff members. Findings revealed that the school was indeed dysfunctional due to unqualified and under-qualified teachers. It was concluded that ODL lecturers need to support untrained teachers through ODL teaching and learning strategies in order to become qualified teachers.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the Ministry of Education's National Plan for Higher Education called for "responsiveness to regional and national needs for academic programmes, research and community service" (Ministry of Education 2001). Besides teaching and research, community engagement was identified as one of the missions of higher education institutions that were urged to "demonstrate social responsibility" by offering expertise and infrastructure (Hall 2010: 3). Furthermore, higher education institutions have the responsibility to play a noteworthy role by engaging in the real-life challenges of community schools in their community (Muller-Christ et al. 2014: 134–137).

According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (CHE 2004), community engagement should not only comprise a paternalistic relationship, but rather a shared and all-encompassing relationship between a community and a higher education institution (CHE 2004). According to Hall (2010: 47), there is an unambiguous need for South African case studies of high-quality practices that can serve as exemplars and facilitate the expansion of theory and practice. Higher education institutions involved in community outreach activities, combined with research, should not merely be a requirement, but should rather be a priority in the South African framework. One of the missions of higher edu-

cation institutions is to assign all lecturing staff members to participate in community engagement and to help them find ways of making a difference in the community.

Pre-school teaching is a social profession that requires a heart for pre-school children and a commitment to caring for them, because pre-school children need warm and supportive interaction with adults (Jalongo et al. 2004: 143). Quality pre-school education creates well-established avenues of access, so that all children can participate in their society's values (Jalongo et al. 2004: 145). Leeson et al. (2010: 146) state that where children come from impoverished and relatively unstimulating home environments, quality pre-schooling is especially beneficial for the child's holistic development and future growth. It is imperative that learning experiences at pre-school facilities acknowledge young children's natural, playful style of learning while, at the same time, providing quality programmes and competent pre-school teachers who know how to provide the relevant supportive educational experiences.

Both functional and dysfunctional ECD schools will impact either negatively or positively on young children's development and achievements. The learning of specific knowledge and skills, in fact, the development of the young child in totality (social, emotional, cognitive and physical) is directly affected by the school environment, classroom teaching, quali-

fied and excellent teachers and responsible management.

The early years constitute a foundation for later achievements since early childhood is a sensitive period, marked by a high degree of both adaptability and vulnerability in the developing child (Gordon and Browne 2014: 31). Therefore, dysfunctional ECD schools need to be transformed into functional ECD schools. Furthermore, early childhood care and education cover a broad field of activities, characterised by diverse goals, systems, strategies, curricula and target groups. To promote these activities, young children from all cultural backgrounds need functional ECD schools to help them develop in accordance with their abilities (Gordon and Browne 2014: 32). One of the challenges to providing effective early childhood education is the training of more qualified teachers. Unqualified and under-qualified teachers contribute to the nature of dysfunctional schools. Many teachers are teaching with no academic qualifications and this situation will always impact on learners' success (Msila 2014: 343-344). This situation makes it imperative that universities should become involved in community schools.

For this reason, a case study was conducted at an ECD school. At the time, academic staff members at an ODL institution were involved in restructuring an ECD school. Various factors relating to the teaching and learning of young children, such as under- or unqualified staff, the children's needs, classroom teaching and the outdoor environment were identified as dysfunctional focal points that required attention.

A non-governmental organisation (NGO) pre-primary school was chosen, not only to provide academic training to the unqualified teachers, but also to transform it into a functional ECD school. The challenge for community engagement lies in the call to provide support and services that are aligned with a higher educational institution's third mission, namely community engagement and the needs of the school. The relevant ECD School is situated in a poor socio-economic area, it seemed to be dysfunctional and its needs had never been investigated prior to this engagement.

To date, very little qualitative or quantitative research has been done into the nature of the impact of disadvantaged NGO schools on young children. By doing this research, the researcher hopes to indicate how important the needs of

dysfunctional ECD schools are in educating young children and empowering them with positive knowledge, skills and attitudes. Therefore, this research is an attempt to fill the knowledge gap that exists in understanding the challenges faced by dysfunctional ECD schools.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to determine the needs and challenges of a community school in order to determine what role lecturers at ODL institutions could play as part of their community engagement in transforming a dysfunctional school into a functional school.

The investigation was done by obtaining reports from the teachers and the school principal on several aspects of the school's functioning. Before stating the empirical part of the research, it is necessary to explain the theoretical foundation on which the research was based.

Theoretical Framework

This research project is based on the situated learning theory of Lave and Wagner (1991), as well as on Vygotsky's (1896-1934) theory of social constructivism. Situated learning is often explained as "enculturation" or accepting the norms, behaviours, skills, beliefs, language and attitudes of a particular community (Woolfolk 2010: 314). Learning is viewed as a social process in which identity, membership, a need to belong in order to learn, and interpersonal relationships are significant (Beck and Kosnik 2002: 82). The parties involved in this learning theory are referred to as apprentices (the young children in this study) and masters (the teachers) who teach and model learning activities. Situated learning is based on the idea that skills and knowledge are attached to the situation in which they are taught (Woolfolk 2010: 560).

Young children acquire the knowledge and skills they need to perform in the classroom and outdoor environment by engaging in social activities. Through situated learning they learn from teachers and peers who act as guides and/or models. Over the years, according to Woolfolk (2010: 321), apprenticeship has been regarded as a successful strategy to educate children. By being involved in learning activities at the side of a master (ECD teacher) and other apprentices (peers), young children master numer-

ous skills, trades and crafts. Teachers, who model, demonstrate and correct, and have a special bond with learners, motivate the children during situated learning. Situated learning is also based on the fact that guided participation in learning activities results in “participatory appropriation,” which means that children appropriate the knowledge, skills and values involved in their learning activities (Woolfolk 2010: 321). The principle underlining situated learning is based on the idea that learning is a process that takes place in a participatory social context. In the social context (the indoor and outdoor environment of young children), the children increasingly take on more responsibilities until they are able to function independently.

Supporters of situated learning believe that it places learning in real-life situations. Situated learning emphasises that learning in the real world is not like studying in school (Beck and Kosnik 2002: 82; Lave and Wenger 1991: 32, 50, 70; Woolfolk 2010: 314). This principle is applied especially to the learning of young children. Their learning environment (classroom environment, as well as the outside environment) should represent real life experiences, even if it is done by means of fantasy play. Therefore, a practical learning situation should be the point of departure for all young children’s learning activities.

Two important concepts in the situated learning theory are “community of practice” and “legitimate peripheral participation”. There are three elements defining community of practice, namely the mutual engagement of participants in action (young children’s activities – whether in an indoor or outdoor environment); negotiation of a joint enterprise (explaining and modelling of activities by the classroom teacher); and the development of shared learning and teaching experiences (Lave and Wenger 1991: 32, 50, 70). Legitimate peripheral participation, the other important principle of situated learning, constitutes mutual engagement of participants in action. It refers to authentic participation in group work, even if the skills and abilities of children/learners are immature and still emerging, and even when their contributions are poor (Woolfolk 2010: 557).

Another learning theory that is appropriate to this research project, is Vygotsky’s (1896–1934) social constructivism – a theory on cognitive development – that explains learning as constructing knowledge via children’s social inter-

actions and relations with the environment (Brewer 2007: 29). This theory’s point of departure is that learning takes place in a group. Social constructionists do not focus on individual learning. Children construct their own knowledge through social interactions and the teacher provides various learning materials and a congenial learning environment which, in turn, serves as intrinsic motivation (Brewer 2007: 8, 61).

Vygotsky (1896–1934) emphasises social interaction and social play as primary influences in children’s lives and that socially valued skills should be instructed at a very early age. Due to the fact that a child is embedded in the culture of his community and should be educated accordingly language, physical, emotional and social development build one on another so that different skills can be mastered through interaction with others in a special way (Gordon and Browne 2014: 109).

Social interactions lead to on-going step-by-step changes in children’s thoughts and behaviour, therefore, teacher-children relationships are vital to learning. Both parties adjust to one another. Teachers use their knowledge to guide their teaching and plan curriculum, and they mediate social relationships, identify challenges and appreciate achievements (Gordon and Browne 2014: 110).

Higher Education Institutions’ Community Engagement

Higher education institutions have three main responsibilities, namely tuition, research and community engagement. However, apart from the fact that policy emphasises the importance of community engagement, it is still being overlooked (Council on Higher Education 2010: iii). Most authors (Favish 2010; Hall 2010; Muller 2010; Nongxa 2010; Slamet 2010) use both the terms “community engagement” and “social responsiveness”. Therefore, in order to adhere to the third mission of an ODL institution, the authors attempted to execute one of its most important responsibilities, that is, involvement in community engagement.

As this project focuses on identifying the needs of an early childhood community school by ODL lecturers, a brief explanation of the nature of early childhood education is deemed necessary.

The Nature of Early Childhood Education

According to a literature review, a functional ECD school is a place where early childhood education resembles excellent management of, *inter alia*, staff, learning programmes, the learning environment, and health and safety (Meier and Marais 2012: 77-85, 111-121, 127-132, 151-152, 199-225, 251-271, 281). Due to page restrictions only management, learning programmes and the learning environment were discussed in the literature study.

The quality of the learning and teaching environment is crucial. A functional ECD school is a school that promotes a developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), which is structured in accordance with classroom space including table space, a soft carpet area, a floor area and open shelving where children can select materials. Guidance techniques must be comprehensible and reliable and young children must be exposed to a variety of activities that enhance and develop their abilities, interests and learning styles (Gordon and Browne 2014: 127-131).

Creating learning environments for young children in an ECD school requires specialised knowledge and skills. When planning for babies (birth to 18 months) the environment should accommodate nappy-changing areas from where the teacher can still keep an eye on the other babies. As babies initially learn through their various senses, the environment and activities provided should be planned to provide sensory stimulation while, at the same time, avoid sensory overload. Therefore, a rich sensory environment with a variety of visual and tactile experiences, as well as a rich auditory environment which includes human speech and singing, different types of music, wind chimes and sounds of the outside world, is imperative. Development of smell and taste can be achieved by providing food, perfumes and flowers (Greenman et al. 2008: 29, 48). The safety features of toys and other objects are important because babies investigate objects by putting them into their mouths (Orr in Meier and Marais 2012: 207).

Effective staff management is an important characteristic of a functional ECD school. Current ECD practices promote professionalism and the employment of qualified staff in all positions. Appointing qualified teaching staff is important. Teachers working with young children need to

be able to carry out a variety of tasks and duties as part of their daily responsibilities (Meier and Marais 2012: 78-79). Unqualified teachers are not always able to promote effective learning in an unbiased and multicultural manner, to assist children to experience success, to model language usage, to listen and respond to children's communication, and to design an environment that motivates young children to participate actively (Meier and Marais 2012: 78-79).

The duties of an ECD teacher are set out by Gordon and Browne (2014: 32-33). They maintain that these teachers must declare their calling by acknowledging their identity as teachers who are able to engage in developmentally appropriate practices and committed to ethical teaching.

Gordon and Browne (2014: 142) explain the diversity of roles of ECD teachers that makes teaching very appealing, namely the role of storyteller, custodian, psychologist, traffic director, filing clerk, poet, nurse and musician. Furthermore, they need to take on the role of programme designer and curriculum planner, scientist, conflict mediator, classroom manager, assessor and treasurer. They also have to communicate with families and commit to partnerships with the parents or caregivers of young children. In addition, they must show insight into current issues and trends in early childhood education, such as developmentally and culturally appropriate curriculum (Gordon and Browne 2014: 297-298, 336, 356, 382, 418).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was considered suitable because it involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. Qualitative researchers are motivated by an in-depth inquiry to study a phenomenon in its natural setting (for example a dysfunctional ECD school) so as to make sense of this phenomenon, and to interpret it in terms of meaning and understanding constructed by people (teachers and the school principal of the centre) in their real-life world (Denzin 2005: 3).

The purposive sampling plan included three teachers and their school principal. All the participants teaching in this ECD School were female. Data was captured by means of interviews and the interview schedule contained four semi-structured questions and one open-ended question.

A follow-up interview was held with each of the participants as the data captured from the first interviews had to be expanded due to a lack of rich information. The follow-up interviews were conducted in a conversational manner. Each interview began with an explanation of the purpose of the interview, an undertaking of confidentiality and the reassurance that there were no right or wrong answers. The follow-up interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. All the required ethical measures were adhered to, including consent for obtaining information from the Social District Office on the West Rand. Observation was also used to gather data regarding classroom teaching, indoor and outdoor environment activities, and problems experienced by the participants. The captured data was hand-coded to ensure internal consistency. Content analysis and interpretation of data were done in accordance with the questions in the interview schedule. Four themes were identified and interpreted within the theoretical framework and literature review.

Different tactics were used to eliminate bias. These included initial and follow-up interviews that were transcribed verbatim, as well as observation. Furthermore, reliability was ensured by involving multiple researchers and using two peer reviewers. The findings are presented and discussed in the next section.

FINDINGS

Four themes were identified from the data captured from the interviews, namely (1) a need for qualified teachers; (2) participants' understanding of a functional ECD school; (3) participants' understanding of a dysfunctional ECD school; and (4) current needs as identified by the participants themselves.

A Need for Qualified Teachers

All four participants at the ECD School were unqualified. Two of them had passed Grade 11 and the other two had matric certificates. All the participants emphasised the fact that they wanted to study further. Participants A and B agreed that they needed more training in ECD, but they did not have the necessary financial support. Participant C said "I would like to be trained as an ECD teacher because that would make me a better teacher". Participant D claimed that the

reason why she wanted to improve her education was because "I want to know more about children and want to become a school principal one day". Only two out of the four participants emphasised their need and desire for further studies.

Participants' Understanding of a Functional ECD School

Participant A said that a functional ECD school is a school that meets the standards set for early childhood education where children's rights should be the first priority of the teachers. Furthermore, this participant emphasised that a holistic developmental approach should be part of a functional ECD school. It is also a place where teachers, parents and the community work together. Participant C explained the meaning of a functional ECD school as "a place where children improved their social interaction by having good relationships with other children and where they develop their life skills". According to participant D, it is a "resourceful school that has material suitable for children [and] function properly on a daily basis". The participants revealed a very basic understanding of a functional ECD school.

Participants' Understanding of a Dysfunctional ECD School

Participant A explained a dysfunctional ECD school as "a school where no daily programme is followed and where teachers are not ambitious". It is a school where teachers do not prepare for their lessons and "only teach when they see visitors". At this particular school there was much gossiping, therefore, according to this participant, the school where she was teaching was definitely a dysfunctional ECD school.

Participant B also acknowledged that she was currently teaching at a dysfunctional school because "there is not sufficient equipment on the playground or toys for the babies". Participant C agreed that she was teaching at a dysfunctional ECD school "because young children of different age groups are together in one classroom, without sufficient resources and equipment". She revealed that she found it very difficult to teach in such a classroom and that it was impossible for her to promote learner-centred teaching. Participant D also pointed out that the

ECD School where she was teaching qualified as a dysfunctional school, because the unqualified principal was not able to manage the teaching staff or the non-teaching staff. There was also no suitable material for children's indoor or outdoor activities. Furthermore, she was teaching the three-to four-year olds, but she revealed that she has "to share the classroom with another teacher who cares for the babies". This participant revealed that she did not want to be part of the school. She helped out in another pre-primary school a year ago and that other school had "more opportunities for professional development" because of the capability, knowledge and managerial skills of the school principal. The answers of the participants confirmed that the ECD school under review indeed lacked the characteristics of a functional ECD School.

Current Needs Identified by the Participants

The interviews revealed that all the participants needed to be trained and they requested assistance and support from tertiary institutions. Participant A recommended in-service training by ODL lecturers from tertiary institutions at the ECD School. Participant B revealed that she needed financial assistance to obtain a national senior certificate and a BEd degree in the field of ECD, as she loved teaching young children. Participant C indicated that she needed "assistance with parent involvement and the making of teaching and learning equipment". Participant D stated the following: "I am in the dark and I want to be in the light". This participant wanted more information on health care for young children and, more especially, "notes on caring for babies". Both participants C and D were grateful to the ODL lecturers for their six-month intervention, which has convinced them that they needed formal and in-service training.

DISCUSSION

The importance of the responsibilities of higher education institutions to identify the needs and challenges of communities schools have been clearly stated by recent research done by Muller-Christ et al. (2014: 134-137). According to these researchers, higher education institutions must engage in the real-life challenges of community schools in their societies in order to enhance education.

A Need for Qualified Teachers

From the participants' responses it is clear that their motivation for further studies lacked content and depth. They merely acknowledged that they would like to become excellent teachers and obtain greater knowledge about children. However, they were not able to define the kind of knowledge they needed and neither could they identify the duties of ECD teachers. According to Gordon and Browne (2014: 32-33), those who work with young children must declare their calling by acknowledging their sense of identity, they must be able to engage in developmentally appropriate practices, and commit to ethical teaching and child advocacy. None of the four participants mentioned the different roles, responsibilities or values-based engagement of early childhood teachers (Gordon and Browne 2014: 142, 297-298). In addition they must have insight into the current issues and trends in early childhood education, such as multicultural education, as well as the physical, cognitive, language and psychosocial development of the young child (Gordon and Browne 2014: 336, 356, 382, 418). It seems that the participants do not understand the importance of being a qualified early childhood educator for the sake of the children. This finding corresponds with the ideas of Msila (2014: 343-344) who emphasises that unqualified and under-qualified teachers contribute to the nature of dysfunctional schools. Many teachers are teaching with no academic qualifications and this situation will always impact on learners' success. This situation calls for universities to become involved in community schools. The findings also reveal a need for the principles of the socio-constructive theory – a theory that mediate social relationships, identify challenges and appreciate achievements. If this is not done, learning cannot take place.

Participants' Understanding of a Functional ECD School

Judging from the responses of all the participants, it appears that they have a very simplistic understanding of a functional ECD School. They only referred to it as a school where young children's social development and life skills are being promoted with well-resourced equipment. According to the literature review (Meier and

Marais 2012: 29, 77-85, 111-121, 127-132, 151-152, 199-225, 251-271, 281), a functional ECD school is a place where early childhood education resembles excellent management of, *inter alia*, staff, a multicultural environment, parent involvement, the learning environment, health and safety, and finances. None of the participants referred to the different aspects and activities of a functional ECD School. According to the situated learning theory, a functional ECD School is one with teachers who model, demonstrate and correct while having a special bond with the children. Ongoing guided participation in learning activities results in “participatory appropriation”, which means that children appropriate the knowledge, skills and values involved in their learning activities (Woolfolk 2010: 321). None of the participants mentioned that the environment is a place that provides learning in real-life situations as suggested by the situated learning theory (Woolfolk 2010: 314). Their learning environment (classroom, as well as the outside environment) should represent real-life experiences, even if it is by means of fantasy play. The participants also did not acknowledge that learning takes place when children construct their own knowledge through social interactions and relations with the environment. Therefore, creating a social learning environment should be an ECD school’s point of departure in order to be functional.

Participants’ Understanding of a Dysfunctional ECD School

Reflection by the participants revealed that no authentic teaching was taking place and revealed unprofessional behaviour by the unqualified teaching staff. The school principal appeared to lack management skills, while there were no opportunities for professional development of teachers in this ECD School. Furthermore, insufficient teaching media and outdoor playing equipment were matters requiring urgent attention. Even placing three-to four-year olds in the same classroom as babies, is not a healthy situation. These challenges regarding poor resources all had a tremendous impact on the children’s development. According to the situated learning theory, acquiring skills and knowledge is attached to the situation in which children are taught (Woolfolk 2010: 560). Young children cannot obtain new skills and knowledge if the indoor and outdoor learning environment is ne-

glected. They obtain new knowledge and skills, learn problem-solving procedures and master learning strategies only in specific learning situations. Every teacher has to support the children in order for them to apply the new knowledge and skills gained in everyday situations. In a dysfunctional ECD school, a rich learning environment is lacking and therefore young children cannot acquire this knowledge and skills. The interviews with the participants showed evidence of a limited understanding of a functional or dysfunctional ECD school. Moreover, they do not even fully understand the impact of a dysfunctional ECD school on the development of young children.

Current Needs Identified by the Participants

The findings revealed the need of the participants to be qualified. This is in line with the literature review. Appointing qualified teaching staff is important. Teachers working with young children need to be able to perform a variety of tasks and duties as part of their daily responsibilities (Meier and Marais 2012: 78-79). Unqualified teachers are not able to promote effective learning in an unbiased and multicultural manner and to help children to experience success. They are also unable to model language usage or to listen and respond to children’s needs. In addition, unqualified teachers are not capable of designing an environment that motivates young children to participate actively (Meier and Marais 2012: 78-79). Unqualified teachers cannot contribute towards a functional ECD school. Furthermore, the participants agreed on their need for guidance and support from tertiary institutions with regard to training. They acknowledged support from the ODL lecturers who visited the ECD school on a regular basis. The participants also lacked an understanding of the different options for improving their knowledge, and wanted the ODL lecturers to present workshops and give more examples of excellent developmentally appropriate activities for young children.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to identify the challenges confronting an ECD community school in order to determine what role ODL lecturers could play in changing this dysfunction-

al school into a functional school as part of their community engagement responsibility. This research project identified a lack of trained educators as one of the challenges that an ECD community school was currently facing. Teachers without qualifications or under-qualified teachers were appointed to ECD teaching posts. Those who wanted to enrol for teacher training programmes lacked the financial support. The unqualified and under-qualified participants appointed to teaching posts did not know what to teach and how to teach it. They could not explain the nature and functions of a functional ECD community school, or the role of the educators and the community. They also needed to develop a professional image, consciousness and skills to engage with parents and other staff members. This paper also identified the need for assistance and support from ODL lecturers as the participants preferred to better their qualifications through ODL. South Africa is a country that needs to take a broad approach towards the problems experienced in ECD teaching and learning. Over a number of years, the education crisis in South Africa has provided researchers and academics with ample opportunity to conduct research, to argue and debate and to write, with the expectation that every input and contribution would provide resolutions to the problems that educators, learners, parents and communities are facing. However, the complexity of poverty and its implications for education cannot be investigated enough. Answers should be found, solutions should be introduced and implemented, and a wide range of educational remedies is needed to address the ECD needs and challenges in particular. Early childhood education is the cornerstone of every child's future education and is not inferior to other levels of education. All role players should take hands in making a mutual effort to improve education for young children. It could turn out to be a journey to a priceless destination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the paper is limited it might encourage further discussion around the issues raised by the participants. Furthermore, the findings cannot be generalised and projected to all ECD community schools. However, the recommendations are general guidelines that could be implemented by ECD community schools experiencing the same needs.

An urgent recommendation is that unqualified and under-qualified teachers in ECD community schools must be identified in order to train them through ODL while teaching in these schools. However, it is important that these students should have a passion for young children and want to be part of the children's development years. Financial support should also be made available. As the participants prefer training through ODL, recommendations in this regard could include regular visits to the school by ODL lecturers. During these visits, teaching and learning content, teaching strategies, management of discipline, and creating effective and encouraging inside and outside learning environments surfaced as aspects that need to be addressed. ODL lecturers need to present workshops that include examples of excellent developmentally appropriate activities for the young children at the school. It is no secret that for young children to acquire knowledge, skills and a positive disposition, in fact, for the young child to develop in totality (socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically), there must be ECD schools with qualified teachers, a healthy environment, sound classroom teaching, and responsible management. It is the responsibility of ODL lecturers to participate in the upliftment of communities by identifying not only their needs, but also ways to engage with them in order to support dysfunctional schools and transform them into functional schools.

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