

Assessment of the Norms and Standards for Day Care Centres for Preschool Children in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The quality of day care centres is mainly determined by two interrelated aspects in terms of developmental outcomes: the physical infrastructure of the centre and the educational environment in which the children are placed. This article reports on an empirical investigation into the conditions of three day care centres in Limpopo. A literature study focused on the norms and standards of quality Early Childhood Education centres and conditions of these day care centres were measured against the established norms and standards. Data was gathered by means of observations and interviews. The research revealed that early childhood education in both township and rural schools do not meet the required standards. The implications of the conditions of these centres on the children's development are briefly discussed, and recommendations are made.

INTRODUCTION

Historically young children below public school age have primarily been the responsibility of their parents, as far as nurture and personal guidance were concerned. However, today more and more children are attending day-care centres because most mothers are full-time workers (Burchinal et al. 2000). It has become imperative that provision for minimal safe care must be available for large numbers of very young children. The economic pressures that promote employment of mothers have played a role as well. Other researchers, such as Howes et al. (2006), state that the increasing participation of mothers in the labour force, dwindling family size, and the disappearance of extended family support are worldwide phenomena. These conditions create a growing demand for out-of-home child-care which matches or even improves that in the homes.

The demand for educationally-oriented day-care services has been fuelled by the growing awareness of the developmental importance of the early years of life; the years from three to five years are increasingly seen as an auspicious time for children to begin their education (Howes et al. 2006). Despite this increasing demand for early day care centres, facilities are not evenly distributed. The overall availability of quality day care programmes tends to be much higher in rich industrialised nations than in poor and developing ones (Burchinal et al. 2000). Large differences distinguish even nations that are geographi-

cally close to each other. There are also large differences in communities within the same country or province, as is the case in South Africa.

According to Whitaker et al. (2007), there is currently no firm public commitment in highly developed countries like the USA, UK and Canada to provide quality care for all the children. While there has been growing acceptance of such provision for children from low socio-economic families, public opinion has not convinced lawmakers in these developed countries to make programmes suitable for the optimum development of young children prior to their admission into public schools (Altman 2008). Penn (2004) points out that Early Childhood Development (ECD) provisioning in these countries (USA, Canada, Australia and the UK) is less systematic and that parents in these countries bear a large part of any services in early childhood education. These countries experience an administrative split between nursery education and welfare care systems. The administration and regulation of the system tends to be ad hoc and often inefficient. In South Africa, the introduction of the now formalised pre-school reception year is some acknowledgement that not all children have shared the same educationally stimulating environment and need to be brought on par before formal schooling begins (Altman 2008). The main objectives of early intervention are to prepare children for entry into formal schooling.

Although the South African government has put norms and standards in place regarding what constitute quality day care centres, these norms

are not being applied in historically disadvantaged communities, namely townships and rural areas. A major challenge experienced by these communities is that there are very few day care centres. According to the Department of Education Survey Report (2005), 40% of the country's day care centres are situated in rural areas, and are mainly administered by Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or are community-based. Most of the teaching staff in these centres is not qualified and therefore they are unable to provide adequate educational support to the learners.

Against this background, the research paper reports on data collected in three day care centres in Limpopo. The findings reported on in this article are limited to observations of norms and standards applied in day care centres as obtained in the empirical investigation. The objective of this research was to ascertain the physical conditions in which children are taught and also to identify the emotional and social well being of the children in order to provide context-specific guidelines.

Literature Study

A literature study was conducted as part of the research. The theoretical framework that underpins this research focuses on ECD provision in historically disadvantaged communities; the relevant South African legislation; the child's emotional, social and cognitive development; the importance of quality childhood experience in children's development; and the norms and standards of good ECD (Early Childhood Development) centres.

Early Childhood Development Centre Provisioning in South Africa

The Department of Education has demonstrated its commitment to early childhood development through various policies and programme initiatives (Department of Education 2005). It has pioneered the recognition of early childhood development centres in education (Department of Education 2005). The government's objective is to improve access to equal and quality education for all children living in South Africa. However, it remains a challenge for government to increase and maintain access to quality education, as there are no coordination systems or pro-

vision of resources (Biersteker 2008). The professionalisation and recognition of ECD practitioners and teachers remains the department's major challenge, because there is no clear legislation that supports the inclusion of the current cohort of ECD practitioners as educators (Altman 2008). The integrated and inter-sectorial ECD initiative that currently exists with other departments and organisations create a challenge because there are no collaborative systems in place (Biersteker 2008). Costing and funding systems of the integrated plan is also a great challenge.

Although there is a growing commitment on the part of the South African government to expand the quality day care services for vulnerable children to improve their chances to participate meaningfully and to achieve their potential, little is being achieved (Barbarin et al. 2010). The National Integrated Plan (NIP) for early childhood development was meant to increase the provision of quality day care centres in this country. The section below discusses legislation on early childhood education in South Africa.

Legislation on Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development programmes in South Africa are governed by the Child Act 74 of 1983. The Department of Education (DoE) is using a policy framework outlined in ECD White Paper 5 of 2001 to inform the implementation of ECD programmes. The policy regarding admission to the Foundation Phase as set out in the Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education 2001) has been amended to accommodate Grade R, and the DoE is in the process of amending the Norms and Standards for funding Grade R. The DoE is responsible for phasing in Grade R into the formal schooling system and plans to introduce it in all schools by 2010 (Richter et al. 2010). However, it is the Department of Social Development that is providing social grants, and subsidies to all registered ECD sites, as well as psychosocial programmes. The Department of

Health provides free care to all young children, while the office dealing with children's rights in the Presidency is responsible for monitoring the implementation of government programmes. Despite the involvement of these institutions, ECD remains dominated by the private and community sector. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), community- and faith-

based organisations play a major role in the provision of ECD Rule (2005).

According to UNESCO (2006), South Africa has two types of ECDs, the public and the independent. Public ECD institutions are funded by provincial departments of education and consist of pre-primary schools that provide ECD services and programmes for children aged 3-5. Children from 6-9 years are guaranteed access to education by the South African Constitution Republic of South Africa (1996), in the formal education sector. However, much still needs to be done for the children below five years of age (Meyer 2008).

ECD provisioning in South Africa reflects the apartheid past of this country (Rule 2005). White children have more access to ECD services of considerable quality than coloured, Indian or Black children. In poverty-stricken rural and informal areas ECD provisioning of African children from birth to five years is far lower than in formal urban areas, in terms of quality and quantity. According to White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education 2001), children from urban and higher-income groups generally have more access to services of higher quality than poor rural children. Only 40% of the ECD sites are located in rural settings, yet children in farm and rural areas need ECD the most. According to the White Paper 6 (Department of Education 2001), children from farm and rural areas are most likely to suffer exclusion from early childhood development. There is also evidence of stunted physical growth and slower emotional and cognitive development amongst these children.

A variety of ECD services exist in the category of independent ECD services that are funded through parents' fees, community fundraising and donations of materials, with or without financial support from the government Department of Education (2001). Independent ECD provision includes the following:

- ♦ Reception year (Grade R) at independent schools.
- ♦ The reception year (Grade R) attached to a public school managed by the school governing body and operated by a private individual or the community.
- ♦ Privately operated or community run crèches or nursery schools for children under five years of age.

- ♦ Home based provision for children less than five years of age.

The National Curriculum Statement Policy (Department of Education 2002) caters for Grade R as part of the Foundation Phase of Schooling. Around 500 000 learners were enrolled in Grade R by 2005 and the target for 2010 is to have approximately 1 million children enrolled in an accredited reception year. It is also envisaged that the state will increase its ECD subsidies by 75% by 2010. Until now there have been no curriculum guidelines for children below the age of five years. The DoE, in collaboration with the Departments of Health and Social Development, is working on achieving this goal. Priority will be given to the subsidisation of these programs for poor rural and poor urban families, HIV/AIDS positive/infected children and special needs children (Altman 2008).

The importance of emotional and social development, which lays the foundation for lifelong learning, will be discussed next.

The Child's Emotional, Social and Cognitive Development

Researchers agree that the effects of pre-natal experiences and child-rearing practices during the earliest months and years of a child's life last a lifetime (Bub 2007; Altman 2008; UNESCO 2008). They claim that the kind of early care a child receives from parents, pre-school teachers and care-givers determines how he/she will learn and socialise in school and later in life. During early care the child develops all the key elements of emotional intelligence, namely, confidence, curiosity, purposefulness, self-control, capacity to communicate, and cooperativeness (Department of Education 2002).

These early years are also important for the acquisition of concepts, skills and attitudes that lay the foundation for lifelong learning. These include language acquisition, perception and motor skills required for learning to read and write basic numeracy, concepts, problem-solving skills and a love for learning (Biersteker 2008: 213). With quality ECD provision in South Africa, educational efficiency will improve, as children will acquire the basic concepts, skills and attitudes required for successful learning and development prior to formal schooling.

Social and emotional development involves the ability to share with others, and among oth-

ers, to be considerate, to deal with emotions, to handle conflict, to gain problem-solving skills, to develop a healthy self-image and to be disciplined. According to Biersteker (2008: 213) children learn all these activities during play and they also learn to express these feelings with their peers in the early years.

Normative development should also be stimulated. The purpose of discipline is to help the child to identify with the demands of society. Children should be supported in such a way that they can act with increasing responsibility towards the demands of life. They must gradually learn to speak the truth, to be honourable and to respect others (Carnegie Foundation 1991). The Carnegie Foundation Report (1991) shows the importance of social and emotional skills. There is increasing evidence that the absence of obvious behavioural problems and the development of skills such as self-control may be important for future success in life (Myers 2001; Biersteker and Kvalsig 2007; Biersteker and Dawes 2008; Pance 2008). Self-control may even be necessary for the full development of formal cognitive skills. Researchers (for example, Heckman et al. 2006; Currie 2008) agree that self-control can be taught. For example, experiments have shown that children can be taught to delay engaging in attractive forbidden behaviour when they are given helpful hints on how to distract themselves. Improving social skills such as self-control is the goal of early childhood programmes.

Play gives children an opportunity to exercise their muscles and to practise balance and co-ordination. In this way their physical abilities are developed. Activities such as climbing, crawling, jumping, balancing, using scissors and riding are important. Basic care of the body, teeth and hygiene must be included in the programme (Biersteker and Kvalsig 2007).

The section below will discuss literature dealing with the importance of quality early childhood experiences in the children's development. These are of utmost importance for children to succeed academically.

The Importance of Quality Childhood Experiences in Children's Development

The impact of early childhood education on very young children's development has provoked controversy among professionals. This controversy revolves around the influence of quality

materials in the early childhood centres on emotional quality (Currie 2001; Fuller et al. 2004; Biersteker and Kvalsig 2007). In the past decade a considerable amount of empirical evidence has been collected to address this question (Campbell and Ramey 2008). Much of the recent research has been conducted within the context of general system models. From this point of view, there is consensus that the quality of child-care experiences, like the quality of family experiences, is related to the child's social and cognitive development.

General systems models view the development of the child as being influenced by multiple, interrelated systems ranging from those most proximal to the child, such as the family, to those distant, such as the community (Meyer 2008). Such contextual factors are necessary when relating child-care experiences to the child's developmental outcomes because the family's socio-economic status and education will determine their choice of child care centre. For example, children in higher quality day care are more likely to have better educated families with higher incomes and more progressive attitudes about childrearing (Biersteker and Kvalsig 2007). This is in contrast to families from low socio-economic backgrounds who have less education. Children from the latter families are likely to find themselves in low quality day care centres with inadequate facilities and unqualified care-givers (Campbell and Ramey 2008). These care-givers are unable to stimulate the children's cognitive growth because they are less qualified.

According to (Vygotsky 1978: 92), learning only takes place in what he calls the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents intellectual functions that have not yet matured and are still in the process of maturation. Vygotsky describes the ZPD as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development, which is determined through problem solving under the guidance of an adult or in collaboration with more capable peers. This implies that the child's mental development can only be determined by clarifying two levels which are the actual developmental level and the Zone of Proximal Development. The actual developmental level represents the child's mental function. Therefore, when determining the child's intellectual ability using

tests, the child's actual developmental level is tested.

The Zone of Proximal Development is the potential level of development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. Vygotsky (1978: 94) claims this is achieved when the clues are offered to the child. By helping the learner with guiding questions, showing learners how the problem is solved and subsequently the learner solves the problem with the help of the adult. Vygotsky regards learning to be a cognitive function that occurs in a social context. It does not occur naturally as it occurs in association with other people. The notion of the ZPD helps to propound a formula which states that good learning is in advance of the child's natural cognitive development and occurs in a social context. Vygotsky believes that learning is something that starts outside people, in the society around them and then it is transferred inwardly. Intelligence therefore, does not begin in a person but rather in the relations between a person and the outside world (Vygotsky 1978: 95)

The social relationship between the teacher and the learner informs the development of the child, creates new mental formulations and develops higher processes of mental life. This assumption therefore, places the child's intellectual development squarely in the hand of the adults in the child's life (Bruner 1983). The child mind will not develop on its own; its development depends on the level of interaction between the child and the adult in his or her life.

Learning therefore is not just something that one does before a test or examination. It is essential for cognitive development and for the child's development as a whole person (Bruner 1983; Thomason and La Paro 2009). The responsible adult moves the child beyond the stage into the ZPD where learning takes place. This learning then awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting and co-operating with people in his or her environment. Once these processes are internalised they become part of the child's independent development. Interpersonal relations are therefore important role in any teaching situation. Teaching according to Vygotsky, is nothing other than the social transaction of meaning (Vygotsky 1978).

It is for this reason that Vygotsky (1978: 89) refers to teaching not as teaching but mediation.

He refers to pupils as learners and discusses the importance of mediating learners' learning experiences. An adult acts as a mediator between the child's actual development and the child's ZPD. Adults structure activities for the child so that the child gradually gains control over the activities that need to be performed. The mediator's role is that of scaffolding so that the learner can become independent (Fuller et al. 2004). The adult helps the child by setting problems to be solved and then providing clues to the solutions. With the help of the mediator or group the learner is assisted to work out an individual and personal solution to the problem. Through discussions, mediation and negotiation, learners gain mastery. They discover for themselves and therefore are able to internalise new concepts and gain conscious control over their interactions.

There is growing evidence that the quality of infant and early child care is linked to the cognitive and language development of infants and toddlers. According to the NICHD study of Early Child Care (Burchinal et al. 2000), the quality of child care was a modest but significant predictor of children's cognitive and language development at ages 15, 24 and 36 months. They also found that the infant/adult ratio was independently related to the infant's overall communication skills. Another study found that children in higher quality day care classes are more likely to be securely attached to their care-givers and to be more socially oriented than were children in poor or minimally adequate centres (Howe et al. 2006).

Considerable evidence links child care quality and cognitive development among preschoolers. Child care quality has been positively related to preschool age children's cognitive development and social competence in various studies that controlled the family background characteristics such as the social economic status, maternal education or family structure (Garces et al. 2006; Schneider and Salooje 2007). Some studies have related child care outcomes to centre-based child care experiences beginning during infancy. The Abecedarian and CARE early intervention projects have demonstrated that preschoolers who experienced high-quality child care beginning at infancy show better progress on tests of language and cognitive functioning than preschoolers without such child care experiences. Conversely, children who attend poor quality child care centres during infancy scored

lower on standardised academic assessment during middle childhood than did their peers without such infant child care.

Other studies have extended the general systems models to ask whether child care experiences are related to different developmental pathways. Of interest is to determine whether the child's care type, quality or quantity is differentially related to child outcomes for particular groups of children.

In the section below the focus is on the norms and standards of quality day care centres that were used to determine if such norms could be used to evaluate the three day care centres investigated.

Norms and Standards of Good Early Childhood Development Centres

There is no consensus on what constitute a good, developmentally appropriate ECD programme. However, researchers such as The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1991), Rule (2005), Biersteker and Kvalsig (2008), agree that a good ECD programme should be rich in language development, creative art, music and free play, among other things. ECD care specialists agree that a good ECD should facilitate the acquisition of positive learning dispositions such as taking interest, being involved, persisting with difficulties, communicating with others and taking responsibility.

Table 1 shows the physical requirements of quality day care centres.

Table 2 indicates the age-related requirements of quality day care centres.

The physical, social and cognitive environments discussed above will not yield good results if the educational environments are not taken into consideration. Children's cognitive, social and language development is dependent on what they learn in the day care centres.

In order for children to gain significantly from the day care environments there are certain guidelines that are education-specific for effective learning to take place. These educational guidelines will be discussed in the section below.

Small Class Sizes with Low Care-giver/Child Ratio

Early childhood researchers who examined classroom practices in community programmes and were concerned with the amount of time that children were spending in day care centres found that smaller groups of children and a lower staff/children ratio of seven children to one adult resulted in better social and cognitive outcomes for children (Biersteker and Kvalsig 2007; Meyer 2008). A smaller group size and a lower ratio of children to staff appeared to enhance children's development by permitting more positive interaction to occur between the children and the teacher, and between the children and the learning materials (Biersteker and Kvalsig 2007).

Today very few day care centres have such low numbers and most day care centres in devel-

Table 1: Physical requirements

<i>Structure</i>	<i>Floor</i>	<i>Room</i>	<i>Water</i>	<i>Toilets</i>
<i>Must be Safe</i>	Covered with carpet	Large enough to be used as a sick room A staff room for staff members to put away belongings Adequate storage room of perishable food safe for children.	Adequate washing up facilities Clean drinking water	Toilet facilities safe for children. A hand washing facility in the toilet. Facilities for cleaning nappies and chambers. Facilities for bathing children. Separate toilets for staff.
<i>Outdoor Playing</i>	Outdoor playing space of 2meters x 2 meters per child. This may consist of lawn, sand pits, shady areas and hard surface.			

Table 2: Age-related requirements

<i>Babies</i>	<i>Toddlers</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Grade R</i>
Allow time for learning, feeding and changing nappies. Should include stimulating games. Focus on language development. Children should be fed at fixed times. Sleeping time should be adapted to suit the children's needs. Suitable activities should be carried out daily including peeping games and handling colourful toys, as well as physical activities such as rolling over, getting up and walking while holding on to equipment and furniture. It is important to allow for time for cuddling and affection.	Should include stimulating creative activities, problem-solving opportunities, games using imagination and language development. Food should be given at fixed times. Time should be set aside for toilet training and assistance in the use of the toilet. Rest and sleeping times must be determined. Toddlers must be able to pull and push toys and have climbing apparatus. Toddlers should be encouraged to start drawing and painting. Toddlers should be taught simple songs and rhymes and should listen to stories.	More structured programme. A variety of suitable activities Feeding and resting should take place during fixed periods. Toilet turns should be made routine. Children should play with more advanced toys such as complicated puzzles and building blocks. Climbing and wheeled toys should be more challenging. Attend to group activities such as drawing, singing, learning rhymes and listening to stories. Provision should be made for a variety of fantasy games, a book corner, a nature table and a dolls corner. Culture-related activities should be introduced. Indoor and outdoor setting should support appropriate learning experiences. The programme should assist young children in acquiring correct health care habits. Activities should be introduced to promote skills: language stimulation, motor development, independent behaviour, co-operation, thinking skills and pre-maths and reading skills.	Grade R is now part of the Foundation Face. The focus is on the child-initiated approach. Informal curriculum but educationally oriented Grade R teachers should have a deep insight into child development. Teachers must be able to affirm the uniqueness of each child. The programme should have an integrated approach. Teachers must foster the holistic development of the child. The programme should aim at developing the social, cognitive, emotional and physical skills of the child.

oped countries such as the USA have a teacher/child ratio of 20: 1 (Howes et al. 2006) whereas in less developed countries like South Africa the number can be as high as 60 children to 1 teacher or care-giver. Low teacher/child ratios allow teachers to spend more time on individuals, create comfortable environments for children to thrive in groups and offer quieter and focused activities (Richter et al. 2010).

Care-givers who Receive Support to Reflect on Their Teaching Practice

Researchers (for example, Lamb 1997; NICHD 1999; Whitebook et al. 2006) have described best

teaching practices as occurring when good teachers generate questions, gather data, test hypothesis and draw conclusions to guide their interactions with the learners. Teachers are encouraged to systematically adopt a reflective, research-oriented attitude towards their work. Teachers are given in-service training and consultative help in assessing children's needs, setting objectives, planning and implementing activities that will stimulate particular kinds of communication, and evaluating their own interactions with the children (NICHD 2006). In contrast, care-givers who work in community and public child care programmes mostly lack time for planning,

reflection and assessment. Very few if any receive supervision and mentoring from trained professionals.

A Concentrated, Long-lasting Intervention

Programme intensity and duration do not guarantee quality (Biersteker 2008). Some effective day care programmes are offered only half-day during the school year, while others are full-day, year-round programmes, but of poor quality. Programmes also vary in age groups catered for ranging from eight months to five years (Meyer 2006).

These variations are not associated with programme differences and programme effects. Intensity may include time, concentration that comes with low teacher/child ratios, home visits and coherent curricula. In contrast, although learners may be in whole-day programmes few stay in one programme, and as they move from classroom to another they may be exposed to different curriculum approaches NICHHD (2000). An attempt by government to put five-year-olds in an overcrowded classroom with limited resources might be doing more harm to the children than good. Most grade R teachers are not drawn from redeployed school teachers and therefore have no ECD training. Creativity in these classrooms is dampened as attested by most researchers (Meyer 2008; Biersteker 2008; Richter et al. 2010).

Co-operation with Parents

Child care staff who strive to collaborate with parents are able to share knowledge about the child from the home and classroom perspective. Not many day care centres today do home visits and few still are able to involve parents as volunteers in day care centres (Meyer 2006).

In all these ways typical practice fails to reproduce the intensity and coherence of the experimental programmes. Hence it is not surprising that today's large-scale community-based centres have fewer positive outcomes.

In the light of the above theoretical framework, the empirical investigation focused on identifying the conditions of the early child care centres in selected sites.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this descriptive study, an observations checklist was used and interviews were conducted

as part of data collection in three day care centres in Limpopo Province. The objective of this research was to ascertain the physical conditions in which children are taught and to identify the emotional and social well-being of the children in these centres.

Sample

The sample comprised three schools, all situated in Limpopo Province. The criteria for the selection were based on the location, language and the socio-economic background of the children. The choice of two different locations (that is, urban and rural) was made to ensure that the sample would be representative. The parents of most of these children were from a low socio-economic background and most of them earned less than R2 000 a month. Most of these children came from homes where only one member of the family was earning an income. Two of the day care centres that were investigated are in rural areas whereas the third centre is situated in a township. The different school sites were chosen to allow for a comparison of sites. The township school was a government-funded school, the second school was a community-based site partly funded by NGOs. The third school was community-based and had no funding.

Procedure

Once the three schools had been selected, observations were conducted in them. The main aim of the observation was to investigate the physical conditions of the schools and to ascertain the children's social, emotional and cognitive developmental levels. This was achieved through observing these learners' interaction with their teachers and peers. These three centres were each visited by the researchers on three different occasions for a week long.

Context

Three day care centres were visited in three different settings in Limpopo Province. The first one was a Grade R class which is situated in the foundation phase, while the second and third day care centres were community crèches which received no government funding. Each of the sites visited is described below.

School 1

This school was situated in the township area of Nkowa-Nkowa, a Black township. This was a government-funded primary school which has a Grade R class. The township community was mostly middle class, but the children in this school were from a low socio-economic background. The affluent members of the community send their children to former Model C schools. The school surroundings are very clean and it was a functional school.

School 2

This day care centre is situated at Mariveni village, which is a disadvantaged Black community. It has clean surroundings and it was functional. Each family contributed an amount of R10.00 towards constructing the building. They also received funds from IDT.

School 3

This day care centre is situated in Burgersdorp, which is a disadvantaged Black community. It has clean surroundings and it was functional. The community contributed an amount of R10.00 per family in order to construct the building.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of three schools participated in this investigation. The findings from the observation of the three centres are presented by comparing the physical conditions of the three centres with the norms and standards that are set as requirements by the Department of Education (2005)

Physical Aspects**School 1**

The principal's office was well organised with time-table, work allocation and posters. She was very supportive and in control of the school environment. The school had 10 teaching staff (nine females and one male).

The Grade R classroom was well organised with posters and teaching aids on the wall. All of these were in English. The classroom was very clean with no children's work on the wall. There

were very few books for learners to read and fewer toys. There were 36 children in this class of which 21 were girls and 15 were boys. These children were neatly dressed in school uniform. Two teachers were responsible for these learners: one was a qualified day care teacher whereas the other was a high school home economics teacher.

School 2

This day care centre had a total of 116 learners and 2 untrained care-givers. The children were accommodated in three classrooms. The teachers were to receive training in early childhood development in 2009. Although the day care centre was in a disadvantaged community there were toys for children to play with. The two care-givers showed a lot of emotional support for the children. The children in this day care centre were very quiet.

School 3

This day care centre is situated in a low socio-economic village in Burgersdorp. The school had little resources but the children were very vibrant. There was a shortage of books, toys and sleeping mats for these learners. There was just a dusty yard, with a broken fence, and pit toilets without doors.

This day care centre had a total of 70 learners and 3 untrained care-givers. The learners were accommodated in three classrooms. Learners were taught colours and counting in English. The teachers claimed that most parents were taking their children out of the day care centre because they wanted their children to be taught in English.

Social Aspect**School 1**

These learners were in Grade R but they were treated like Grade 1 learners and followed a strict curriculum. Although this school was in a middle-class community it had a feeding scheme because most of the learners in this school were from low socio-economic backgrounds. It was a quintile one school which was fully funded by the government. There were a few toys in this classroom but it seemed as if the learners did not

play with them. The children in this class were very active and played with each other, but they seemed to be afraid of the teachers.

School 2

These children were treated with love and were given food in this centre although it seemed as if there was not much food. There were a few toys in the classroom and the children were given a chance to play with them. Despite the support provided by the care-givers these children were very quiet and inactive. A lot of them also seem malnourished.

School 3

The children in this school had the most caring care-givers, who were ready to interact with them. They were also given time to interact with each other. Although this centre did not have any toys for children to play with these children were vibrant and were able to interact with each other in a peaceful and caring way.

Emotional Aspect

School 1

The Grade R teachers in this school did not support the learners' emotional needs. They were also distant. The teachers appeared not know the children's backgrounds well. These children were being taught a Grade 1 curriculum instead of being offered an informal curriculum. In this classroom there were not enough books for learners to read or to be read to. The classroom did not have a print rich environment. There were a few posters on the walls with the days of the week and the months and they were in English. These learners were not able to count numbers in their home language but did all the counting in English. They also said the days of the weeks in English and not in their first language. This is despite the school policy that encourages mother tongue education in the first three years of schooling. Thereafter, learners should use English as a medium of instruction.

School 2

Care-givers in this day care centre spoke to the children all the time and they appeared to be

fulfilling the children's emotional needs. They attended to those children who were quite young and needed cuddling. The children in this centre were attached to their care-givers. Despite the care-givers' emotional support for the children, the children were very quiet – probably due to a lack of stimulus in their environments and the poor socio-economic conditions they found themselves in.

School 3

Care-givers in the school spoke to the children all the time and played with them to fulfil their emotional needs. There appeared to be a great deal of trust between the care-givers and the children in this centre. Children in this centre appeared to be happy and were able to interact with the each other and with their care-givers. Although it was the poorest of the three centres that were visited the children were very vibrant and were ready to talk to the researchers.

Comparison of the Three Sites with the Norms and Standards of Quality Day Care Centres

A comparison of the three sites with the norms and standards of quality day care are discussed in the Table 3. The findings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparison of the three sites with the norms and standards of quality day care centres

<i>Physical condition</i>	<i>School1</i>	<i>School2</i>	<i>School3</i>
Running water	+	x	x
Toilets	+	x	x
Toys	+	x	x
Feeding scheme	+	x	x
Books	+	x	x
Electricity	+	x	x
Teacher/pupil ratio	2: 60	1:30	1: 40
Clothing and wraps	x	x	x
Blankets and mats for sleeping	x	x	x

In Table 3 the norms and standard of good day care facilities are compared with the facilities in the three centres visited. The following symbols are used to represent availability or unavailability of various items in a particular school. A plus sign (+) means the item is available whereas an x sign is used to indicate unavailability. School 1 met some of the require-

ments, but schools 2 and 3 failed to meet the requirements as they lacked most of the basic requirements. Day care centres are expected to have food to feed the children. School 1 had a feeding scheme as it was situated in the formal school environment. The other two schools did not enjoy the benefit of the government feeding scheme as they were community centres.

Although school 1 had some books, there was no reading culture in this school. This is despite the fact that the teacher has a postgraduate degree. She is a high school teacher who opted to teach Grade R. Day care centres are supposed to prepare children for school hence the importance of early education. Shortage of books implies that these learners are not introduced to the culture of reading at an early age; therefore their cognitive skills are not developed. Through reading children's vocabulary grows and they learn a great deal about the world.

Failure of these centres to provide food for the children also poses a health risk as most of them come from very poor homes. Research on ECD has shown that rural children are likely to suffer from stunted growth due to lack of nutrition (Altman 2008). The importance of day care centres also lies in its ability to provide a stimulating environment for the children. Table 3 clearly shows that these children are not stimulated enough. Without toys these learners are not able to be creative. Research has shown that children from two to six years learn best through play and child-initiated topics or discussions Biersteker (2008). The capable adult is able to expand more on the child-initiated topics in what Vygotsky terms the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1978). The Department of Education should show its commitment to improving the educational success of children from disadvantaged communities by providing these centres with the necessary financial assistance to improve the physical infrastructure of these centres.

Researchers (for example, Barns and Weikar 1983; Myers 2008; Schweihart and Biesterker 2008) show the link between a supportive environment for young children and poverty reduction. It is widely accepted that young children benefit from healthy, safe and enriched environments. However, in many rural and township schools these conditions are not in place. According to the Department of Education (2006), ECD should be guided by an integrated frame-

work that caters for the children's health, nutrition and educational needs. From the table above it is evident that these needs are not being met in the three day care centres that were investigated.

All three day care centres that were visited failed to meet most of the standards of quality as discussed earlier, but they had certain important attributes. Care-givers in schools 2 and 3 had a relatively close relationship with the children. Children in school 2 were vibrant, they talked readily and the care-givers knew the children individually. These children appeared to be self-confident and showed emotional attachment with their care-givers. They displayed social skills such as taking turns when speaking, and they were able to share the few toys they had with each other. The same was observed in school 3, although children in this centre appeared to be more disadvantaged. However there are other areas where the centres failed to meet the criteria discussed in the literature reviewed. These areas, which include infrastructure and the child/teacher ratio, are discussed below.

Infrastructure

The buildings that are occupied by centres that provide early childhood programmes must meet specific requirements. Although the choice of a building is determined by what is available at a minimum level, the setting should provide facilities for playing, working, eating, washing, toilets, sleeping, resting, food preparation, storage, office, teachers' work space, clothing and wraps. Ideally, the settings should have enough space to house these various aspects. In practice, however, rooms are most often multipurpose and more than one event takes place in the same space. A playroom doubles as an eating area, since both require table and chairs. When a classroom serves many functions (playing, eating and sleeping), convenient and adequate storage space is needed (Myers 2004).

The three selected centres failed to meet these minimum requirements. Although school 1 is relatively well off, its classroom was not partitioned off for the various activities that takes place in the classroom. For example, there was no quiet area for reading.

Both schools 2 and 3 were without the following basic necessities: running water, wash-basins, blankets and mats for sleeping, clothing or wraps, and toys for children to play with.

Child/Teacher Ratio

Children learn more when they are actively involved in their own learning and this is only possible when there are few learners in the classroom. The three centres visited were overcrowded. Teachers responsible for two of these centres were not well qualified and it is therefore not surprising that very little education is taking place in these centres. According to the Department of Education (2006), ECD should prepare children for entry into formal schooling to enhance their chances of succeeding academically. In order to achieve this goal more teachers need to be appointed. The overcrowded classrooms in these centres, coupled with a lack of training for the teachers, shows that children are not benefiting from these centres.

ECD activities are not confined to pre-schooling but concerned with the total well-being and the child's emotional, physical and intellectual development from birth to the six years (Biersteker 2008). Every child has the right to education, survival, protection and optimal development, which should be provided for through ECD (Department of Education 2006). Care-givers in these centres should therefore be provided with the necessary structures to attain these goals.

The support structures that are required to help care-givers do not exist in these centres. The schools do not receive any support from social workers, doctors, dieticians and nurses as in other well-established centres. Children in these impoverished communities are affected by poverty, unemployment and HIV/Aids. These factors result in high mortality rates, for example in 2002 South Africa's overall mortality rate was 71 deaths per 1,000 births (Biersteker 2008).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to compare the norms and standard of day care centres as set out by the government with those found in the three selected day care centres in Limpopo. This was done in order to provide a descriptive assessment of the physical conditions of the three selected day care centres.

The findings revealed that the three day care centres did not meet the physical requirements suggested in the norms and standards. In spite of lack of physical facilities and inadequate training for care-givers, it was found that the care-

givers were able to provide social and emotional support in their work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is suggested that a new approach to the evaluation of day care centres should be looked at, and not only the norms and standards. Children who are from low socio-economic areas can become well-adjusted insofar as their social and emotional intelligence are concerned when cared for by loving care-givers.

It is hoped that this article will trigger a discussion from day care specialists about how they might integrate the importance of emotional and social aspects that help children to become well-adjusted members of society.

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