

Early Childhood Education in South African Townships: The Role of Innovation towards Creating Conducive Teaching and Learning Environments

J. E. (Elsa) Fourie

North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus, Vanderbijlpark South Africa
Telephone: +27 016 910 3066, Fax: +27 016 910 3098,
E-mail: elsa.fourie@nwu.ac.za

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ABSTRACT This paper presents a descriptive study of an Early Childhood Development (ECD) intervention project, grounded in a community-research approach that resulted in more conducive ECD teaching and learning environments in township ECD centers in the Gauteng Province (Vaal Triangle) of South Africa. During the implementation phase of the project, grade R (the year before formal schooling) ECD practitioners from townships in the Vaal Triangle participated actively. Data was gathered through administering open-ended questionnaires and by conducting semi-structured interviews. Although the outcomes of this intervention varied, reflection from the researcher and the practitioners indicated that the project has started to address shortfalls in the teaching and learning environments of grade R ECD practitioners and as a result more conducive teaching and learning environments for learners in township ECD centers. This article discusses an ECD intervention project, focusing on innovative practices that impacted positively on the quality of the teaching and learning environments in township ECD centers in the Vaal Triangle. It also reports on improvements in the innovation skills and knowledge of the grade R ECD practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

Investments in early childhood development are one of the most effective ways to decrease social inequalities caused by adverse environments as such environments hamper the development of young children. Formal schooling age is too late for a child to start education as the early ages form the basis of development and learning in later years. Interventions aimed at improving the quality of early childhood development could increase school attendance numbers and the pass rates of learners in primary and secondary schools. Consequently, there is a need to focus on early childhood care and development.

Early childhood development and education services are defined as interventions that aim to support the cognitive, emotional, physical and social development of children before the age of formal schooling (Kartal 2007; Preston et al. 2012). Investments made in the early childhood years are made for the better future of societies (Fourie 2013). The impact of these investments is extremely significant in the sense that poor and illiterate families become more aware of the importance of education and that these pro-

grammes decrease the differences caused by socio-economic factors (Kartal 2007; Butler-Adam 2013).

The South African Minister of Basic Education (Motsekga and Motlanthe 2011) argues that teachers are the main pillars of a sound and progressive society as they are the ones who pass on knowledge, skills and values to learners. The South African Deputy President, Kgalema Motlanthe (Motsekga and Motlanthe 2011) supports this view when stating that well-trained and motivated teachers are vital in delivering quality education. He further posits that teachers themselves have to take responsibility for their own professional development and that they should be held accountable for enhancing learning and teaching outcomes, as there can be no successful reforms in education without the active involvement of teachers.

Contrary to the above arguments many practitioners in the ECD sector hold minimal teacher qualifications. Consequently, the standard of education for most learners in disadvantaged areas in South Africa is still of poor quality. 'It is a tragedy that good educational opportunities are not available to every boy and girl' (Masondo 2012). It is also a fact that many ECD prac-

tioners who perform the role of qualified teachers have to teach grade R learners in environments that are not conducive to quality teaching and learning. In general, these practitioners also have to perform their teaching duties without the basic resources (Fourie 2013). In a study conducted by Harwood et al. (2012), ECD practitioners reported their need for basic supplies, equipment and food. Black parents also voice the need for resources in poor township schools, arguing that the lack of resources impacts negatively on the educational opportunities of their children (Fourie 2013). The above authors further state that township schools (in the context of this research also township ECD centers) in South Africa yet have to receive the kind of support needed to overcome the legacy of inferior schooling.

The Teaching and Learning Environment

A school environment that contributes to quality teaching and learning consists of various elements, including: principals' and teachers' high-quality capacity, a school culture and climate conducive to teaching and learning, a sound school organizational structure, committed school teams and human resource management, effective resource management, conflict resolution and school–community relationships. The school learning environment influences the teachers' teaching practice, their attitudes towards teaching and learning and the learners' academic achievement (Tok 2011).

Although many teachers and ECD practitioners choose teaching because they like children, enjoy challenges and want to make a difference in children's lives they presently do not receive the admiration that used to be linked to the profession (Tok 2011). While it is a profession that guides minds and builds the character of learners for the future, the teaching profession is widely regarded as a lower-standard, boring but also a difficult job. It is often said that teaching is a very noble profession and although it might be very rewarding, it does require a level of commitment that most other jobs don't (Elmars 2011). In South Africa, township ECD centers are characterized as low-economic environments (Fourie 2013). There is evidence that the morale of educators in these centers is low. In research performed on the wellbeing of South African educators, it was found that many educators did not experience their work places as positive (Jack-

son and Rothmann 2006; Fourie 2013). The behavior of principals as well as educators, according to these investigations, did not contribute positively towards the development and establishment of environments conducive to teaching and learning (Vos et al. 2012; Jackson and Rothmann 2006; Fourie 2013). In this regard Strydom (2011) asks the following question: '....is this negative, all lost picture really all there is to education in our country?' and then answers it by stating that '....there are people and schools and organizations doing what must be done – changing the lives of children and shaping the future.'

Several studies have reported positive changes in teacher's attitudes as a result of training (Wenger et al. 2002; Tok 2011; Fourie 2013). According to Carleton et al. (2008), the self-efficacy belief held by teachers has a determining role in their emotions, thought, behaviors and attitudes related to teaching. In the same way their training experiences have an influence on their attitudes towards teaching. However, attitudes often remain negative because training programmes are not experienced as functional. Tok (2011) argues as follows: 'When everything stays theoretical that what is learned will not be useful in future'. Effective training programmes should include comprehensive and long-term approaches, practitioners that recognize the gap between their current and desired knowledge and skills and practitioner participation in the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions (De Clercq and Phiri 2013). Professional development should be characterized by facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of knowledge in practice (Snyder et al. 2011; Moyo and Ndlovu 2012).

Early childhood teaching is a complex endeavor (Blank 2011). Questions like: 'What constitutes a qualified ECD teacher?' and 'What is high-quality early childhood education?' are asked by many researchers. The answer is often that teachers with a formal teaching qualification are well qualified. However, many South African early childhood practitioners have no formal training for educating and developing the young child (Preston et al. 2012; Fourie 2013). Thus, requiring a formal qualification for educating young children may result in marginalizing these practitioners who may not have access to acquire the necessary education (Blank 2011). It is impor-

tant to identify what works well and makes a difference, but also to identify those areas which need to be addressed and then act to improve these. Since any intervention programme should be aligned with the desired outcomes and should be structured in a manner that would lead to implementation in practice, it is essential to create opportunities to practice skills in real life contexts, to give feedback about the implementation, to follow-up in order to support implementation and to help to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context (Snyder et al. 2011; Butler-Adam 2013).

In-service training is often characterized by a 'crisis mentality' with efforts focused on training large numbers of individuals rapidly to meet workforce demands (Snyder et al. 2011). The quality of such interventions is, however, often labeled as uneven, unpredictable and generally ineffective with regards to intended outcomes. Training large numbers of practitioners rapidly and hoping for knowledge acquisition and skill application without systematic support or follow-up is unlikely to be a meaningful catalyst for significant improvement or change in intervention practices (Snyder et al. 2011). General education and adult learning literature suggest that reform efforts need to incorporate underlying assumptions about individual and systemic change. These assumptions include comprehensive and long-term approaches, practitioners that recognize the difference between their current and desired knowledge and skills and practitioner participation in the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions. Professional development should thus be facilitated through teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of knowledge in practice (Fourie 2013).

In the early stages of implementing an intervention programme aimed at improving the knowledge and skills of grade R ECD practitioners, it became evident that the morale of the grade R ECD practitioners was low. They had no formal qualifications, they had to perform their duties with minimum resources, they were faced with numerous challenges, including health issues, for example learners and parents suffering from HIV/AIDS, socio-economic problems leading to non-payment of learners' school fees, a lack of parental involvement as well as a lack of any form of financial support. This led to most of the practitioners' not experiencing their work en-

vironments as positive, as well as a negative attitude towards their work.

Supporting quotes include the following:

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

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

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

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

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

The researcher was convinced that the negative attitudes and low morale of the participating practitioners would hamper the successful implementation of any knowledge and skills gained towards improving the teaching and learning environments at the ECD centers. The researcher then decided that in order for these ECD practitioners to become more positive in terms of their working environments and to be able to teach their grade R learners more effectively, knowledge and skills in innovative practices were essential. In this regard it is a known fact that the most successful organizations foster innovation, the key element of many successful initiatives and practices (Ehigie and McAndrew 2005; Fourie 2013).

Innovation

Innovation refers to the act of introducing something new: new ideas, concepts and designs to create prosperity and improved results. Shavinina (2013) defines innovation as the implementation of ideas into practice. In the innovation process, creativity leads to invention and the implementation of invention is innovation, which could then lead to adoption (Ehigie and McAndrew 2005). When new ideas are spread from its source of invention to its ultimate users or adopters, the process is regarded as diffusion. The process of adoption is the mental process through which an individual passes from

first taking note of an innovation to the stage of final adoption. Thus, the innovative process is incomplete if only the innovator uses it and it is not adopted by others and does not lead to transformation of the system in question.

Innovation implementation is the transition period during which individuals become increasingly skillful and committed in their use of such innovation. The difference between adoption and implementation is thus vital: communities often adopt innovative practices but fail to implement them successfully (Klein and Sorra 1996; Van Schalkwyk 2013). The innovation therefore fails because it is not implemented with the consistency, skill and care required to achieve its expected results and benefits. Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2013) state that innovation also fails due to a lack of approval and practical support for attempts to introduce new and improved ways of doing things in a work environment. Many innovations are unrealistic and imperfectly designed and implementation is often time consuming and expensive. Effective implementation of any innovative practices requires a sound understanding of the problems and challenges faced by communities (Van Schalkwyk 2013). Due to the complexity of communities, guidelines for participatory development can never be seen as blueprints, but rather as frameworks of values, principles and approaches to promote the ideals of participatory development.

Available literature regarding ECD training programmes mostly focuses on describing the structural features of the intervention and its contents (Snyder et al. 2011). Research on the implementation of organizational innovations is rare. Klein and Sorra (1996) conducted mixed method data collection in this regard. Holahan et al. (2004) conducted studies on the implementation of innovative practices in industries and schools. Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2013) investigated team innovation by focusing on the creativity and the implementation stages of innovation. Although the findings of these studies indicate many stumbling blocks in innovation implementation, the need to support grade R ECD practitioners was of such nature that the researcher decided to go ahead with the training programme by initially focusing on innovative practices.

According to Jaftha (2013), over eagerness often leads to academics, students and communities falling into several gaps, including the

notion that the university has all the knowledge, the notion that the university must develop the community ('..raise them up to where we are..') and the notion that academics assume that they know everything. In order to avoid the obstacles in the implementation of innovation, the ECD practitioners in this project were fully involved in the planning and implementation of the training programme.

There is a need to advance the scientific basis for ECD intervention programmes focusing on fostering innovative behavior, but even more so for the measurement of the success of implementation efforts (Snyder et al. 2011). There is a need to share what works for whom, under what circumstances and whether what was delivered went according to the way in which it was planned (Fourie 2013). This article discusses an ECD intervention project that impacted positively on the quality of teaching and learning environments in township ECD centers in the Vaal Triangle of the Gauteng Province, South Africa.

Description of the Intervention Project

In 2011 the researcher engaged in a 10 month long community-based research project. The project was conceived after reading and reflecting on the empirical and theoretical context of: early childhood development, intervention project, early childhood practitioners, community-based research, innovation, innovative practices, teaching and learning environment, teacher attitude and teacher morale.

The initial aim of the intervention project was to empower grade R ECD practitioners with knowledge and skills to create conducive teaching and learning environments in township ECD centers. However, due to the low morale and negative attitudes displayed by the participants, the need arose to focus on fostering innovative behavior. Being more innovative could impact positively on the quality of the teaching and learning environments at the ECD centers and as a result on the quality of the teaching and learning of grade R learners.

The practitioners agreed that they needed to gain knowledge and skills towards being more innovative. They voiced a serious need to improve the teaching and learning environments at their respective ECD centers. Together, these practitioners were responsible for the early childhood development of about 450 pre-school learners.

The researcher had in depth knowledge of ECD theories, teaching and learning strategies, innovative practices as well as the application of theory in practice. The practitioners were involved in determining the contents of the training programme.

Classes were presented on Saturdays, twice monthly. All classes involved theory and practical application. The practitioners were expected to implement what they have learnt during the training at their ECD centers. Practical examples of their implementation achievements as well challenges had to be submitted at the start of each class. Each class included a session for reflection during which challenges and successes in the implementation of knowledge and skills were discussed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research followed a community-based research approach. The interaction between theories, action, lived experience and critical reflection represents a cycle of learning embedded in the community-based-research process (Ibanez-Carrasco and Riano Alcala 2009). The educational framework supporting this approach to teaching and learning lies in adult education and it focuses on the learner having some control over the learning process and experience (Levin and Martin 2007). The interaction between theories, action, lived experience and critical reflection represents a cycle of learning embedded in the community-based-research process (Slamat 2013).

Community-based research enhances the practical experience of the student and teacher. Similar to teaching, research is a core university business. Applied research is a form of engaged scholarship. Community-based research has its roots in applied research and is outcome-directed with benefits to communities (Winter et al. 2006). Research that focuses on specific community issues or that provides a point of university access for community members, is a structural and functional indicator of an engagement agenda within universities. For most universities it is presently a newer form of scholarship. According to Hollander (2009), the manner in which the researcher asks questions, grounds the study in the literature and the higher standards held in employing the very same tools than practitioners may use, make such work scholarship and sets it apart from the world of practice.

Boyer (1990) as well as Peterson and Stevens (2013) identify a number of interrelated forms of scholarship, including 'scholarship of discovery' which closely resembles the notion of research and contributes to the total stock of human knowledge; 'scholarship of integration' which underscores the need for scholars to give meaning to their discovery by putting it in perspective and interpreting it in relation to other discoveries and forms of knowledge; 'scholarship of application' which focuses on the fact that knowledge is not produced in a linear fashion as 'theory' leads to 'practice' and 'practice' leads to 'theory'; and 'scholarship of teaching'. Within the framework of a scholarship of engagement, the traditional roles of teacher and learner become blurred and what emerges is a learning community including community members, academics and service providers. Inter-related forms of scholarship together amount to what is referred to as scholarship of engagement. Through reflection and community-based research, viewed and practiced as a scholarly activity, the context for a dialogue between theory and practice is provided.

A qualitative research design was used for this research. According to Creswell (2009) and Minichiello and Kottler (2010) qualitative research developed in social and human sciences as a reaction to the view that human beings can be studied in the same way than objects. Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as multi-method focused, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. A qualitative research design was suitable for this research as it takes into account the context and the participants' categories of meaning. It further allows for examining complex issues, is dynamic and researchers can generate explanatory theory about a phenomenon.

Both open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were utilized as research instruments. The open-ended questionnaires were administered when the researcher became aware of the negative attitudes and low morale of the participating ECD practitioners. The aim of administering the questionnaires was to determine the reasons for their low morale and negative attitudes. Semi-structured interviews with

all the participants were conducted to generate data on detailed views and opinions regarding the reasons for their low morale and negative attitudes. A set of pre-determined open-ended questions on an interview schedule was developed to guide the researcher during the interviews. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and views regarding the reasons for their low morale and negative attitudes (Maree 2010).

Through conducting face-to-face interviews with all individual participants, the researcher established a relationship with the ECD practitioners and also gained their co-operation. The interviews were audio-taped and handwritten notes were used to support the recordings. This assisted in the transcriptions for the purpose of analysis (Maree 2010).

Based on the data obtained from analyzing the responses to the open-ended questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews, a training programme was then designed to empower the ECD practitioners in terms of innovative practices. All participants were actively involved in designing the programme.

The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with all the participants at the end of the intervention. The interviews were conducted to determine the success of the implementation of innovation and the challenges that the grade R ECD practitioners might have experienced in the implementation of the knowledge and skills that they have acquired during the training.

A set of predetermined open-ended questions on an interview schedule was developed to guide the researcher during the interviews. Participants were guided and encouraged to share their experiences and views regarding the successes and challenges in the implementation of innovative practices at their respective ECD centers.

The interviews were audio-taped and handwritten notes were used to support the recordings. This assisted in the transcriptions for the purpose of data analysis (Maree 2010).

Population and Sample

The population of this research comprised of grade R ECD practitioners in townships in the Gauteng province of South Africa. A purposive research sample of fifty grade R ECD practitio-

ners was drawn from a township in the Gauteng province. Purposive sampling is based on the judgment of the researcher and is composed of elements that contain the most common characteristics of the population (Creswell 2009). In this manner information rich sources were selected from which a great deal could be learned. The research sample represented more than 10% of the population (Maree 2010).

Ethical Measures

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Department of Health. All the participants were informed about the nature and aim of the research and all of them completed informed consent forms. The participants were assured that their personal information would be treated as confidential and that they could withdraw from the research at any time. The participants gave permission that the research findings could be published.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the responses to the open-ended questionnaires that were administered before the training started were analyzed and coded. Similar codes were then aggregated into themes (Maree 2010). In order to generate data on detailed views and opinions regarding the reasons for the ECD practitioners' low morale and negative attitudes, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were then conducted. The data were analyzed and coded and similar codes were aggregated into themes (Maree 2010). The data obtained from the responses to the open-ended questionnaires and the data generated from the face-to face interviews, were compared and contrasted to determine the extent to which it agreed or did not agree with each other. As the data correlated positively, more complete and well-substantiated conclusions about the reasons for the ECD practitioners' low morale and negative attitudes could be reached. The following themes were identified:

Funding Issues

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

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

Supporting Quotes

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

'I have 24 children, sometimes 12 pay.'

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

'My centre is empty.'

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

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

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

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

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

A Lack of Parental Involvement

The practitioners revealed that parental involvement is a serious challenge in the effective teaching and learning of the grade R learners. Parents don't communicate with them and don't support their children in terms of their education.

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

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

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

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

Overcrowded Classrooms

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

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

Poverty

The participants reported that children come from poor families, are often not well fed and are sometimes abused.

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

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

Sick Learners

The participants indicated that they had learners in their classes who were disabled, who suffered from epileptic attacks and who were HIV positive. Parents also bring their children to the centers when the children are sick.

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

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

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

'One of the learner having the Epilepsi.'

Learner Conflict

The data indicated that there is a high degree of conflict amongst the learners.

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

Low Self- motivation

The practitioners stated that their self- motivation levels were low. They need to stay focused on being friendly and caring.

Supporting Quotes

'I have to smile for the child and parent.'

'I want to be more courageous.'

'We must change the thinking of the staff teachers.'

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

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

'I will like to be always happy.'

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

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

Lack of Qualification

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

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

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

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

Fear for Change

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

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ECD training programme was then designed to equip the practitioners with knowledge and skills focusing on innovative practices in order to create environments conducive to teaching and learning. Literature indicates that the majority of development projects are initiated by outsiders and that these projects are rarely founded spontaneously by the community itself (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000; Fourie 2013). In this regard the authors refer to Africa as a graveyard of development projects due to failures resulting from externally induced development and externally managed processes.

Remarks from Community Members in this Regard Include

'They arrive already knowing everything. They come here and look around, but they see only what is not here'

'Developers come overnight they just arrived. They did not tell the people. They made us think that they were coming to save us'

Jafta (2013) supports these statements when postulating that community engagement is a human issue and that it must be an interface between human groupings. Developers often think that they know best and therefore their prime function is to transfer knowledge to communities whom, by definition, know less. Academics often regard themselves as the sole owners of developing wisdom and as having the monopoly of solutions which consistently underrate and under-value the capacities of local people to make their own decisions as well as to determine their own priorities. It seems difficult for developers to view community needs and opportunities through the eyes of the end-beneficiaries (Dudley 1993; Jafta 2013). Therefore, participation often starts after projects have already been designed and community participation in such cases is nothing more than attempts to convince beneficiaries what is best for them. Development professionals should thus adopt the motto of planning with and not for the people (Van Schalkwyk 2013). It was for this reason that the participants in this research were fully involved in determining the contents of the training programme.

The training programme focused on innovative practices that involve creating and bringing into use new services, new ideas, new systems and new ways of doing. The researcher also focused on building the ECD practitioners' self confidence, on reducing their fear for rejection, taking risks and making mistakes, as well as the belief that innovation would mean extra work and that it could not be implemented if all the resources needed for effective teaching and learning were not available.

At the end of the intervention project the researcher conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with all the participants in order to determine the success of the implementation of innovation and the challenges that the grade R ECD practitioners might have experienced in the implementation of the knowledge and skills that they have acquired during the training.

The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed and coded. Similar codes were then aggregated into themes (Maree 2010). The following themes were identified:

Addressing Funding Challenges

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

Supporting Quotes

'My ECD centre's yard is clean, I have security and nutritious food for the childrens.'

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

'I try to find sponsors for teaching equipment.'

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

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

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

Improving Parental Involvement

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

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

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

Dealing with Poverty

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

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

Addressing Learner Conflict

The practitioners said that they focused on having discipline in their classrooms.

Supporting Quotes

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

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

Low Self-motivation

The data indicated that the practitioners were more motivated towards their daily work and that they wanted to be more friendly and caring.

Supporting Quotes

'I am happy to can know about the quality ECD centre. I planted a tree and grass.'

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

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

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

Qualifications

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

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

Fear for Change

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

Supporting Quotes

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

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

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

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

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

Overcrowded Classrooms

The ECD practitioners revealed that although they did not have the funds to build additional

classrooms, they were motivated to find sponsors.

Supporting Quotes

'I try to find sponsors for more classrooms and teaching equipment.'

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

Sick Learners

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

Supporting Quotes

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

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

The data that was generated through the face to face, semi-structured interviews with the grade R ECD practitioners revealed that the practitioners have gained knowledge and skills and were empowered to implement innovative practices towards creating more conducive teaching and learning environments at township ECD centers. The data also indicated that they have to deal with numerous obstacles and challenges in the implementation of innovative practices. However, the researcher is convinced that the community has an obligation towards the school and therefore towards teachers and ECD practitioners as well. Much as the community expects miracles from these practitioners, it has to become part of the school or ECD centre.

CONCLUSION

During the last few months of 2011 a considerable degree of coherence and mutual action developed between the researcher and the participating grade R ECD practitioners. An understanding of the value of innovative practices and

its value in creating more conducive teaching and learning environments for learners in township ECD centers was created. The grade R ECD practitioners implemented new ideas, new systems and new ways of doing.

As an academic, it was rewarding to work collaboratively with a group of grade R ECD practitioners. It was once again a valuable experience to work in a non-traditional learning setting. The grade R ECD practitioners indicated that they felt empowered in terms of knowledge and skills for implementing innovative practices towards more conducive teaching and learning environments. It was also rewarding to experience the growth in their self confidence and the ways in which they overcame their fear for rejection. The practitioners accepted that taking risks and making mistakes were part of the journey to more effective grade R teaching and learning. They were also convinced that implementing innovative practices would not necessarily mean extra work and that it could be done with the resources that were available.

As a result, they also revealed that they were more positive towards the teaching and learning of their grade R learners. The researcher realized once again that these practitioners were extremely passionate about the teaching of grade R learners. The value of innovation in improving teaching and learning environments also became evident. The researcher observed that the negotiated, reflective practice impacted positively on the training and empowerment of township grade R ECD practitioners. This can be supported with the words of a practitioner:

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made: Due to the low morale and negative attitudes displayed by the participants, the need arose to focus on fostering innovative behavior. Being more innovative impacts positively on the quality of the teaching and learning environments at the ECD centers and as a result, on the quality of the teaching and learning of grade R learners.

In order to practice social responsibility, universities should intervene in early childhood

development as such interventions have the potential to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. Any programme focusing on professional development should be characterized by a two-way engagement, an interface between human groupings. It should be aligned with the envisaged outcomes and structured in a way that will lead to implementation in practice.

The community should never be used as a means to achieve researchers' goals. This might destroy any well planned development initiative. Researchers involved in community-based research should not seek immediate results as such an approach would undermine attention to institution building. Any pressure to deliver results can influence researchers to take matters out of the hands of the community and to complete everything themselves. Community engagement should be based on collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions and the communities that they serve. Researchers should therefore adopt an approach of planning with and not for the people.

Knowledge and skills should not stay theoretical; opportunities for practical implementation should be created. It is necessary to give continuous feedback about the implementation, to support implementation and to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context. However, basic knowledge and skills that practitioners must master towards effective grade R teaching and learning should include some form of empowerment towards implementing innovative practices.

The Department of Education should continue to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood education as well as the need for qualified early childhood educators. It is however, important to recognize the work done by ECD practitioners who do not have formal qualifications. If not, it will result in a situation where they are marginalized because they do not meet the requirements to obtain a formal qualification.

The researcher hopes that this research will draw attention to the importance of quality Grade R education and the role that universities can play in this regard.

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to this research. By working in one community there is a limit to the generalizability of the results. Future research

could include grade R ECD practitioners from more township ECD centers. However, the researcher is of the opinion that the aim of this intervention project, which was to empower grade R ECD practitioners from township ECD centers with skills that offer them the opportunity to earn a living, but more importantly, to care, teach and develop society's most vulnerable members, namely young children, and to encourage more conducive teaching and learning environments, has started to be realized. The researcher acknowledges the role of managing change for the effective implementation of innovative practices. This would be the focus of the next research project.

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