



Challenges to effective early years practitioner professional development in disadvantaged communities and strategies for improvement

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Abstract

In recent years, practitioner professional development has garnered increasing attention from researchers, resulting in a substantial body of empirical studies from around the world. This paper aims to contribute to the clarification of the concept of professional development and increase knowledge accordingly. Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory provided the theoretical underpinning for the study. It examined the challenges that impede effective professional development provisioning and the strategies for capacitating the 211 practitioners spread across 45 Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres. The setting was the communities in the participating district. The design employed convergent mixed methods research, enabling the use of a questionnaire instrument supplemented by semi-structured interviews. I used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 software to analyse the quantitative data, and the results of the means and standard deviations obtained answered the research sub-questions. The qualitative data were analysed thematically. Results and findings indicate that numerous constraints exist in providing effective professional development for practitioners. An analysis of practitioners' responses identified several strategies to facilitate the provision of their professional development, meeting their needs. I argue that mitigating the challenges confronting community-based practitioners is crucial to achieving quality ECCE, which in turn contributes to sustainable community development.

Keywords: Challenges, Community-based centres, ECCE, Mitigating strategies, Practitioners, Professional development.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This research makes a significant contribution by providing the context for developing a unified and common strategic model for the effective professional development of the ECCE workforce. The study's outcome facilitates the formulation of relevant professional development policies for early-year practitioners in disadvantaged communities.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have explored the link between professional development (PD) and the quality of early year teaching personnel (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Hamre, Pardee, & Mulcahy, 2017). For instance, an Australian study by Russell (2021) found that participation in PD programs by early childhood care and education (ECCE) workers guaranteed that participants accessed deeper levels of cognition, enabling them to fulfill their obligations concerning the child and the family. In Greece, Gregoriadis, Papandreou, and Birbili (2018) studied 45 preschool teachers who reported that participating in several professional development (PD) programmes enhanced their professional fulfillment; their self-confidence increased, and they were able to perform their classroom roles more efficiently. Siraj, Kingston, and Neilsen-Hewett (2019) argue that when PD is well planned and effectively executed, it facilitates the closing of the knowledge gaps that remain after initial practitioner training programmes.

Despite these empirical revelations, my review of previous empirical sources established that, although researchers have explored the importance of PD for ECCE practitioners in South Africa (see for example, (Atmore, van Niekerk, & Ashley-Cooper, 2012; Harrison, 2019; Ncube, 2017)), few of these studies have researched the PD needs of practitioners who work specifically in disadvantaged communities in South Africa. Given this scenario, I assumed that the lack of empirical knowledge on the PD experiences and needs of ECCE practitioners could result in PD programmes and policies being based on mere speculation. Moreover, such a shortage of empirical evidence could equally translate into inadequate or no knowledge of the challenges this cohort of the teaching workforce may face, and a lack of strategies to mitigate against such constraints. Against the background of the importance given to the value of professional development of the practitioners, the present study contributes to the clarification of the experiences of the practitioners, their needs and challenges, and to identify the strategies to assist in improved capacitation of these cohorts of ECCE practitioners in the disadvantaged communities of South Africa.

1.1. Transformative Learning Theory

The transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1991) provides the theoretical foundation for the study. The theory describes how individuals utilize critical self-reflection to analyze their views and experiences, enabling them to change their perception of the world. This approach has gained significant influence in recent years. For example, Sanchez (2018) characterizes transformative learning as adult education aimed at transforming problematic frames of reference, thereby equipping adults to be open, reflective, and emotionally capable of making change. Mezirow (1991) asserts that, for individuals to alter their worldview, they must encounter a disorienting dilemma, an experience that conflicts with their current beliefs. This confrontation compels them to reconsider and revise their beliefs so that their worldview aligns with the new experience (Zhu & Li, 2019). This transformation often occurs through critical reflection in a context-based dialogue with other people. This theory provided me with the necessary lenses to facilitate the understanding of the professional development experiences and needs of the early childhood care and education practitioners I studied.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Why Professional Development of the ECCE Practitioners Matters

I subscribe to the definition of PD of ECCE practitioners by Gregoriadis et al. (2018) that denotes PD as the conscious, continuous development of persons providing ECCE services, to train them in the relevant skills to fulfill their obligations for the children's benefit. Mitter and Putcha (2018) explain that PD is crucial for training practitioners in the knowledge they require to succeed. Hamre et al. (2017) suggest that a well-prepared ECCE workforce would certainly influence the early development outcomes for children. Siraj et al. (2019) and Kashin (2020) found that an adequately skilled ECCE workforce with knowledge of child development offers wide-ranging benefits for the ECCE sector generally. Particularly, Siraj et al. (2019) claim that the PD programmes that would achieve the desired goals would result from a clear knowledge of the needs of practitioners themselves. A study by Garrity, Longstreth, Linder, and Salcedo Potter (2019) points out that the issues of children with challenging behaviors are increasing at preschool centers. Professional development (PD) that aims to adequately prepare practitioners becomes indispensable. Ncube (2017) also reports that developing empirically backed common training programs for the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce will help create a mutual agenda that influences the quality of services provided at centers. Additionally, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) report that high-quality PD programs help create the necessary avenues for practitioners to exchange ideas while working together, enabling them to continually refine and improve their ability to provide quality learning and other services.

2.2. Challenges Facing PD of ECCE Practitioners and Strategies

Studies mention constraints that impede the professional development of ECCE practitioners. Among the challenges mentioned by local and international studies are a shortage of qualified PD facilitators (Chinhara & Sotuku, 2020), absence of financial incentives, and absence of policy guidelines (Komba & Mwakabenga, 2019) poor infrastructure at ECCE centres and a lack of follow-up support (Atmore et al., 2012) provision of PD programmes that do not respond to practitioners' needs (Havnes, 2018) and a shortage of PD opportunities at centres in under-resourced communities (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010).

Studies also found that effective PD of practitioners depends on several strategies. Wingrave and McMahon (2016) report that PD programmes that focus directly on what practitioners do in terms of learning content areas

and the general approaches to teaching and learning will help to equip practitioners more effectively. Visković and Višnjić Jevtić (2018) suggest that PD programmes should be informed by the results of empirical and data-driven analytics to provide clear information on existing gaps between the goals of ECCE, the quality of service provision, and children's performance. The involvement of practitioners in decision-making about their own PD appears to be a strategy aligned with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991). Sanchez (2018) argues that such an approach would help ensure practitioners' commitment and increase their desire to learn. Also, Pölzl-Stefanec (2021) study suggests that linking practitioner PD programmes to their everyday duties appears to motivate them to identify with such initiatives. Personalised PD programmes in collaboration with others in a learning community are another strategic approach supported by literature (Prince, 2018). Spence-Clarke and DeHaan (2020) suggest that the necessary support should be provided to practitioners who are involved in continuous and ongoing professional development. Doing so would enhance the ability of the practitioners to retain meaningful learning and practices. Lastly, the evaluation of professional development programmes serves as an important feedback loop for informing successes and failures, and to facilitate better planning in the future (Sutarsih & Saud, 2019).

2.3. Purpose and Research Questions

This study examined the challenges that impede effective PD provisioning and strategies to improve the skills of ECCE practitioners in deprived communities in the Motheo District Municipality in the Free State Province of South Africa. Two research sub-questions guided the study, namely,

- i) What challenges confront the effective provision of PD for ECCE practitioners?
- ii) What are ECCE practitioners' views on strategies to facilitate the provision of their PD needs?

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods research (MMR) design that involved the synchronized collection of qualitative and quantitative data (Ngulube & Ngulube, 2022) was used. Razali, Aziz, Rasli, Zulkefly, and Salim (2019) explain that the results and findings from such data, emanating from this research design, are interpreted together to recognize the moments and themes of convergence and non-convergence within the data sources. This design facilitated the collection of empirical data to help answer the two research sub-questions.

3.2. Setting, Population, and Sample Size

The target population consisted of ECCE practitioners working at community-based centres in Bloemfontein, Botshabelo, Thaba Nchu, Ladybrand, and Dewetsdorp. I selected the practitioners based on their experience, ensuring they were qualified to participate in the study. The convenience sampling technique informed the selection of practitioners ($n = 211$) from 45 ECCE centres. The convenience sampling technique is a type of non-probability selection method that enables investigators to select primarily the members of the target population that they can easily reach within the timeframe of the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). This technique enabled me to select only practitioners with relevant experience to facilitate the smooth completion of the data collection fieldwork (Scholtz, 2021).

3.3. Instrumentation, Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Using the 4-point Likert scale as described in McMillan and Schumacher (2014), I constructed the Early Childhood Professional Development Needs Questionnaire, hereafter referred to as the ECPDNQ instrument. I also prepared a semi-structured interview guide that enabled me to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. To ensure instrument validity and reliability, I incorporated expert suggestions to refine the instrument's final version. Finally, I pilot-tested the instrument on a different sample of ECCE practitioners ($n = 10$) with similar features to the actual study sample. I deemed the instrument to be reliable because the analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.94 (where the threshold is 0.70 or above) for the internal consistency reliability index of the instrument's items (Bonett & Wright, 2015). To ensure qualitative trustworthiness, I aligned the procedures closely to the principles of reflexive subjectivity (Kalu, 2019), face validity (Earnest, 2020), catalytic validity (Rose & Johnson, 2020), and methodological triangulation (Noble & Heale, 2019) in generating knowledge that can be valuable and trustworthy.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

I approached the Motheo district office for the official list of ECCE centres. With the permission of the district officer, I created a WhatsApp group platform and added the cell numbers of each centre manager to negotiate the dates for our actual visits to centres. This approach enabled the author to avoid visiting centres at times that could have posed encroachment into official times when centres would have been busy with the children. I made use of one community guide to facilitate the navigation of the research sites where the ECCE centres were situated. Upon arrival at each centre, I presented two sets of letters to the centre manager and the practitioners who participated in the study. I then took some time to read the contents of the letters to both the manager and the practitioners and responded to their questions for clarity. Both the manager and the practitioners signed the consent form, after which the questionnaire instrument was administered to all the practitioners at each centre. I conducted one interview at each centre, while twenty centres took part in the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded.

3.5. Data Analysis

The responses to the questions of the instrument were captured using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Then, SPSS version 25 software was employed. I used the means and standard deviations to answer the two research sub-questions. I followed the thematic process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) in organizing and analyzing the qualitative

data. The organizing entailed the coding of the transcripts, which gave voice to the research participants, because many of the coded words are used in the actual presentation of the findings.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

I obtained permission from the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE) (Permission letter dated 29/06/2022) and the University of the Free State Ethics Office (Ref No. UFS-HSD2022/0990/22). Once these permissions were obtained, I proceeded to visit the research sites. I took responsibility for explaining all aspects of the research protocols and assurances, as mandated by the bodies that had provided ethics approval. Participants were informed about the commitment to ensuring that participants remained anonymous in the research reports by assigning pseudonyms, namely, *P1* to *P20*, instead of using their real names.

4. Results and Findings

4.1. Quantitative Results

Table 1 shows the percentages and means of the responses of practitioners regarding the challenges faced in the effective provision of professional development (PD) in communities that participated in the study. Results indicate that a higher percentage of practitioners selected the strongly agree response option for items 1–14, 17–19, and 20, with percentage values of 67.8%, 72.5%, 55.5%, 55.9%, 64.5%, 68.2%, 70.6%, 78.2%, 46.0%, 63.0%, 59.2%, 42.2%, 61.1%, 47.9%, and 47.4%, respectively. Conversely, more practitioners selected strongly disagree (30.8%) for item 15 and disagree (31.3%) for item 16. Similarly, the means of responses for items 1–14, 17–19, and 20 are higher than the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating agreement, while the means for items 15 and 16 are below this threshold. The overall mean response of 3.27 and a standard deviation of 0.58 suggest that practitioners generally agree that the statements in the items reflect challenges confronting the effective provision of PD in communities. The challenges confronting effective provision of early childhood PD in the communities that took part in the study include a shortage of qualified facilitators, budget constraints, the presence of community civil disturbances, lack of adequate infrastructure, lack of government commitment to PD, few incentives for early childhood practitioners, the absence of professional opportunities that can be found in other professions, failure to pay practitioners' salaries, poor working conditions of early childhood practitioners, shortages of quality and variety of tools that can be used to observe and supervise practitioners, and lack of adequate feedback on whether the way practitioners implement new skills impacts children's learning. Findings from the qualitative interviews are used to corroborate the quantitative results.

Table 1. Percentages and means of the responses of practitioners regarding challenges confronting the effective provision of early childhood professional development in communities in the Motheo district.

S/No	Item statement	Strongly agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly disagree n (%)	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Lack of qualified facilitators	143 (67.8)	45 (21.3)	21 (10.0)	2 (.9)	3.56	0.710	Agree
2	Budget constraints	153 (72.5)	38 (18.0)	20 (9.5)	0 (0)	3.63	0.652	Agree
3	Presence of civil conflict	117 (55.5)	64 (30.3)	23 (10.9)	7 (3.3)	3.38	0.810	Agree
4	Lack of adequate infrastructure, such as electricity, cellular networks, internet, etc.	118 (55.9)	62 (29.4)	25 (11.8)	6 (2.8)	3.38	0.80	Agree
5	Lack of government commitment to PD	136 (64.5)	66 (31.3)	7 (3.3)	2 (.9)	3.59	0.61	Agree
6	Lack of incentives for early childhood practitioners	144 (68.2)	50 (23.7)	7 (3.3)	2 (.9)	3.59	0.67	Agree
7	Lack of professional opportunities that can be found in other professions.	149 (70.6)	48 (22.7)	14 (6.6)	0 (0)	3.64	0.60	Agree
8	Practitioners' salaries are low	165 (78.2)	36 (17.1)	9 (4.3)	1 (.5)	3.73	0.56	Agree
9	Poor working conditions of early childhood practitioners	97 (46.0)	79 (37.4)	27 (3.8)	8 (3.8)	3.26	0.82	Agree
10	Lack of quality and variety of tools that can be used to observe and supervise practitioners.	133 (63.0)	65 (30.8)	2 (6.2)	0 (0)	3.57	0.61	Agree
11	Lack of adequate feedback about how practitioners' implementation of new skills impacts children's learning.	125 (59.2)	63 (29.9)	23 (10.9)	0 (0)	3.48	0.69	Agree
12	Practitioners' concerns about their pay or working conditions are dismissed.	102 (48.3)	60 (28.4)	23 (10.9)	26 (12.3)	3.13	1.04	Agree
13	Practitioners' inputs are not sought on decisions that affect them.	83 (40.3)	62 (29.4)	37 (17.5)	27 (12.8)	2.97	1.05	Agree
14	Classrooms are overcrowded	78 (37.0)	57 (27.0)	44 (20.9)	32 (15.2)	2.86	1.08	Agree
15	Practitioners are harassed sexually and abused.	48 (22.7)	35 (16.6)	63 (29.9)	65 (30.8)	2.31	1.14	Disagree
16	Lack of respect from centre leaders	57 (27.0)	30 (14.2)	66 (31.3)	58 (27.5)	2.41	1.16	Disagree
17	Lack of adequate instructional materials	89 (42.2)	72 (34.1)	30 (14.2)	20 (9.5)	3.09	0.969	Agree
18	PD training activities are too limited, too broad, or too structured to assist the acquisition of new ideas or skills.	129 (61.1)	50 (23.7)	22 (10.4)	10 (4.7)	3.41	0.859	Agree
19	Practitioners are unable to apply new instructional approaches due to a lack of assistance.	101 (47.9)	59 (28)	38 (18)	13 (6.2)	3.18	0.937	Agree
20	Unrealistic expectations regarding how long it will take centres and practitioners to adopt and implement goals.	100 (47.4)	76 (36)	25 (11.8)	10 (4.7)	3.26	0.847	Agree
	Cluster mean					3.27	0.58	Agree

Table 2 shows the percentages and means of the responses of the practitioners on strategies to facilitate the provision of their PD needs. The results indicate that most participants responded with strongly agree to items 1–12, with percentage values of 68.2%, 71.6%, 75.4%, 72.5%, 73.5%, 73.5%, 69.2%, 66.4%, 71.1%, 75.8%, 77.3%, and 77.3%, respectively. Moreover, an analysis of the means shows that the means of the responses of the practitioners to items 1–12 are higher than the criterion mean of 2.50, the overall mean of 3.71, and a standard deviation of 0.39.

Thus, ECCE practitioners' views on the strategies that would facilitate the provision of their PD needs include keeping PD programmes simple, organising all district resources to assist practitioners in implementing these instructional priorities, the district office making a concerted effort to support practitioners' adoption of instructional priorities through training programmes, and creating a feedback loop. Other recommended strategies are that administrators keep in mind that instructors will still require assistance in monitoring the implementation of changes in the second year, allowing practitioners to participate in decisions that affect them, making provisions for adequate PD logistics, avoiding civil conflict from taking place, and providing adequate professional opportunities, similar to those available in other professions.

Table 2. Percentages and means of the responses by practitioners indicating their views on strategies to facilitate the provision of their professional development needs.

S/No	Item Statement	Strongly agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly disagree n (%)	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Keep professional development programmes simple	144 (68.2)	64 (30.3)	1 (.5)	2 (.9)	3.66	0.541	Agree
2	Organize all district resources to assist practitioners in implementing these instructional priorities.	151 (71.6)	60 (28.4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.72	0.452	Agree
3	Through training programmes, district offices should make a concerted effort to support practitioners' adoption of instructional priorities.	159 (75.4)	48 (22.7)	4 (1.9)	0 (0)	3.73	0.484	Agree
4	To assist practitioners in monitoring implementation, create a feedback loop.	153 (72.5)	51 (24.2)	6 (2.8)	1 (.5)	3.69	0.549	Agree
5	When it comes to implementing changes in the second year, administrators must keep in mind that instructors will still require assistance.	155 (73.5)	48 (22.7)	8 (3.8)	0 (0)	3.70	0.537	Agree
6	Allow practitioners to participate in decisions that affect them	155 (73.5)	55 (26.1)	1 (.5)	0 (0)	3.73	0.456	Agree
7	Make provisions for adequate professional development logistics.	146 (69.2)	63 (29.9)	1 (.5)	1 (.5)	3.68	0.507	Agree
8	Avoid the occurrence of civil conflict	140 (66.4)	66 (31.3)	1 (.5)	4 (1.9)	3.62	0.600	Agree
9	Provide adequate professional opportunities that can be found in other professions.	150 (71.1)	60 (28.4)	1 (.5)	0 (0)	3.71	0.467	Agree
10	Make adequate provision for the quality and variety of tools that can be used to observe and supervise teachers.	160 (75.8)	49 (23.2)	2 (.9)	0 (0)	3.75	0.456	Agree
11	Create a conducive working environment for practitioners	163 (77.3)	48 (22.7)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.77	0.420	Agree
12	Make adequate arrangements for infrastructure such as electricity, cellular networks, internet, etc.	163 (77.3)	46 (21.8)	1 (.5)	1 (.5)	3.76	0.471	Agree
	Cluster mean					3.71	0.39	Agree

4.2. Qualitative Findings: Challenges Confronting Effective PD

Participants (n = 20) were engaged to respond to the two main issues that informed the research sub-questions. Table 3 shows that interviews with practitioners elicited three subthemes: low salaries or failure to pay salaries; lack of government commitment to PD; and the absence of PD opportunities. These were identified by participants as the constraints to effective provision of PD. These constraints are discussed using the practitioners' verbatim responses to give credence to our discussion.

Table 3. Challenges confronting the effective provision of PD to ECCE practitioners.

Main themes	Sub-themes
Constraints to the effective provision of practitioner PD	Low salaries and failure to pay ECCE practitioners on time
	Lack of government commitment to PD of ECCE practitioners
	Absence of PD opportunities

4.2.1. Low Salaries or Failure to Pay Salaries of ECCE Practitioners

Most of the practitioners bemoaned the meager salaries they received and wondered how they were expected to survive on such inadequate salaries. Practitioners also implicated salary as germane to their participation in any PD programme because if they received their salaries regularly, they would be able to plan. According to P₁₀.

The salary is a challenge. It is a significant one. We are trying. Remember, I was raised in a Christian household where they say to me, "Whatever opportunity that God has presented to you, take it with both hands." So, for me, salary is nothing. But I am just here for the love of these children.

For P₁₀, her passion for the job in ECCE provided her with the drive to persevere. The unreasonably low salary was also a source of demotivation to participate in PD programmes. P₁₃ expressed her opinion on the low salary as follows: "I think the main challenge is the stipend. If there could be a better stipend so that the practitioners can be encouraged and enjoy those trainings". Practitioners often mentioned their salaries in the interviews; they believed it was too low and inconsistent with the number of hours they spent at the centres. This was what P₁₉ meant when she said, "our salary is very low for the number of hours that we work ... we get nothing in return, nothing". P₉ referred to their salary as "peanuts" and blamed the government for it being so inadequate.

It seemed that the practitioners' low salaries were not the only issue. They also expressed frustration with the delays in receiving their meager salaries. The delays were caused by either poor parents who were unable to eke out a few rands in the form of fees or the government failing to process payments in time.

P₂: Yes, even salary. We do have challenges with that. Sometimes we don't get it in time because parents didn't pay or the department, the money didn't come in on that date.

P₂: The first challenge is that from January to March this time, we will not receive payment. The department, they say they realised about this challenge, but they will do nothing because it was too late to hear about it, unfortunately.

Obviously, it would be a frustrating aspect of any paid job not to know when one will be paid. These frustrations filtered through the interview data. This situation is likely to stifle planning and can be a source of a great deal of stress for employees.

4.2.2. Lack of Government Commitment to ECCE Practitioners' PD

The government's failure to commit to PD was the second-most frustrating aspect raised by practitioners. The practitioners clearly understood their positions as pivotal in the education of children at the centres. Practitioners knew that they played crucial foundational roles that tend to define the prospects of formal schooling for the child. The interview extract of P₉ summarises the frustrations of the practitioners.

You know what? I'm angry with the government, I'm angry. I want to be honest. They don't care about us. They don't think ECD [early childhood development] is very difficult. But it's difficult to hold the child's hand... it's difficult to teach the child basic behavior. It's difficult to motivate young children. That child was using a Pampers [disposable nappy], and then you train that child to move, to know how to say I want to go to the toilet. It's very difficult. But we get the peanuts.

The scenario of dejection expressed by the above lines was palpable, and it is, quite honestly, unacceptable to expect childcare personnel to feel this way, knowing that the fates of children rest in the care of the practitioners at these centres. None of the practitioners interviewed said anything positive about the government. P₁₃ was almost begging the government to do its part.

I want to ask if the department will provide anything to practitioners, such as a stipend, to encourage them for training, because the money that practitioners receive is too little for someone who has a family.

4.2.3. Lack of PD Opportunities

Life in rural and disadvantaged communities can be quite challenging in several ways. Difficulties with communication and access to vital information are among the most serious challenges. Thus, even if practitioners were willing to participate in their own professional development, they remained in the dark about where these services could be obtained. Among the many responses, the following three summarize the problem:

P₁₀: My challenge is that I am not hearing anything from anyone. I am not hearing about opportunities, or they are not there. Very difficult.

P₁₁: Except that there's no information regarding the training. Yeah, there's a lack of information.

P₁₅: In terms of having professional people come and teach us, we do not have that at all. It is very challenging. We do things on our own, and it is inadequate.

These reports clearly summarise the situations for the practitioners in these communities.

Table 4. Mitigating the constraints to effective provision of PD to practitioners.

Main themes	Sub-themes
1. Training for capacity development	Targeted, frequent workshops; financial management training; training on lesson planning; training on how to deal with different languages in the classroom; learning about the child.
2. Government support and intervention	Providing financial support; supplying instructional materials; paying salaries; integrating practitioners into the mainstream; providing security at centres; committing to train practitioners; providing funding.
3. Support from colleges and universities	Need for designated colleges to set up training programmes; call for universities to present capacitation programmes.
4. Participation in planning one's own programmes	Practitioners wish to participate in PD decision-making; they desire to be active learner-practitioners

5. Mitigating the Constraints to the Effective Provision of PD to Practitioners

In Table 4, most of the views of the practitioners are encapsulated in four themes, which I discuss below.

5.1. Training for Capacity Development

Practitioners were very clear about their views on what they required in terms of training for capacity development. They understood the importance of frequent workshops that focused on the acquisition of skills in financial management, lesson planning, and presentation. Practitioners also wished to be skilled in how to teach children in multilingual South African classrooms and in learning about child development. Below are the views of three practitioners, which are representative of many practitioners who participated in the study.

P₁: What do I say? Frequent workshops, which can help a lot because with those workshops we shall be addressing the recent challenges that we see around us... , then there will be assessments to help us take stock.

P₂: The practitioners need to be properly trained, to develop professional skills and obtain qualifications, so that they have full information and can teach the children properly.

P₃: I think... we must have the workshops, I don't know, workshops that can teach us how to manage the languages. They can teach us different ways to manage the children's languages.

5.2. Government Support and Intervention

The participants were also very clear on how the government could come to their assistance. They were unanimous in their wishes, which included receiving financial management skills, instructional materials, receiving salaries, practitioners being integrated into mainstream ECCE services, having security guards at centres, having opportunities for receiving training, and funding for those who require further training. Practitioners wondered why they had been left out of the mainstream education system, and thought it was time they were captured in the government system without further delay. Dangerous conditions at centres were a considerable source of worry, and they wanted the government to assist by providing security guards to help protect the persons and facilities at the centres. Four practitioners shared their expectations of the government.

P₄: But sometimes we didn't get that support. So then, if it is possible, the government or department itself can pay the salaries.

P₅: The Government can help by taking us to training, providing those things. I think they can be more helpful by providing even leading educational toys. We don't have those things.

P₆: The department must speed up the process of incorporating us into their programmes, and they need to accelerate the development of these programmes according to age differentials as soon as possible. Let them not keep postponing these matters. Let them have people who will work with us directly, and keep the time frame in mind.

P₇: When it comes to these gangsters, although we know that our police officers are not enough... At least if they can keep patrolling to check if there's still order in the community.

5.3. Support from Colleges and Universities

Practitioners believed that the colleges and universities in the province have a role to play in equipping them with relevant skills. Colleges and universities can set up specialised remedial programmes aimed at the professional development of practitioners. The practitioners were of the view that this was possible if the higher education institutions in the province were willing to commit to assisting them in growing and becoming better prepared for their roles. According to practitioners.

P₈: Okay. I think maybe if more colleges and universities accept us, yeah, with lower registration fees, or maybe they have a programme for us whereby they train us.

P₉: We do not have enough salaries. We lack the funds to register for courses, so perhaps institutions or universities could come up with an idea and allocate a certain amount of funds for individuals working at ECD centres to study with us for a period.

5.4. Participation in Planning Own Programmes

Participating in the planning and development of their own professional development (PD) programmes was an ideal that all practitioners strongly promoted. The practitioners expressed the view that participation in decision-making regarding their own PD would serve as motivation to participate. The statement by P₁₉ captured the views of the other practitioners.

Yeah, I think the practitioners must get involved with the problems that they face because we are the ones who face the problems. Therefore, we must get involved with the solutions because we are the ones going through those things. We should also acquire more knowledge on how we can help ourselves.

6. Discussion

In this empirical study, I explored the constraints that impede effective PD provisioning for ECCE practitioners in the disadvantaged communities of the Motheo district. I also sought participants' views on strategies that would facilitate the improvement of their professional development needs.

Both quantitative results and qualitative findings show that practitioners who participated in our study are faced with numerous challenges that impede effective provisioning of PD. These challenges were clearly explained through the participants' utterances, as contained in both the qualitative and quantitative data; their views support the results of Wei et al. (2010), Atmore et al. (2012), and Komba and Mwakabenga (2019), who reported various similar impediments to effective PD for practitioners. Within the framework of transformative learning theory, these constraints appear to hamper the well-established notion that emphasizes the importance of the role of practitioners in aiding meaningful transformative ECCE and ensuring sustainable development in disadvantaged communities (see (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hamre et al., 2017).) So, if these practitioners are to continue to fulfill their professional obligations, their PD should become a part of the transformative process. Affirmative actions are, therefore, required to address these challenges.

Furthermore, the quantitative and qualitative results and findings show similarities regarding the strategies proposed to mitigate the challenges impeding effective PD. Table 4 highlights these strategies, which corroborate the findings of previous studies (see (Spence-Clarke & DeHaan, 2020; Sutarsih & Saud, 2019; Visković & Višnjić

Jevtić, 2018; Wingrave & McMahon, 2016)) and detail how interventions have the capability to support and transform the professional development of community-based early childhood care and education (ECCE) practitioners in underprivileged communities.

7. Conclusion

In concluding this paper, I argue that our empirical data reveal that the professional development of community-based ECCE practitioners is hindered by preventable impediments. I further argue that creating an enabling environment, in which practitioners are equipped with the necessary skills, would enhance their indispensable role in transforming schooling in rural and disadvantaged communities. Based on these conclusions, I make the following recommendations.

8. Recommendations

First, continuous participation of practitioners in various relevant PD programmes is crucial to improving their skills and confidence in their roles as practitioners. Once capacitated, practitioners will be able to enhance children's performance. As suggested by the practitioners, higher education institutions should champion the PD of practitioners and liaise with the government to ensure that funds are available for PD.

Second, because the transformative learning agenda recommends the active participation of learners, I recommend that practitioners participate in the design and planning of their own PD programmes. I also recommend that the content of the programmes be based on the personal needs of the practitioners. PD programmes must make provision for the active participation of practitioners through various known approaches.

Third, as context is important for successful PD programmes, I recommend that practitioners undergo PD courses and training in their own natural settings. Given the low salaries paid to practitioners (as confirmed by this research data), it would be logical for practitioners to be more receptive to PD training that is presented at their own workplaces.

Finally, I recommend the establishment of an effective monitoring, assessment, and feedback framework. Every PD training, whatever form it takes, should be monitored over a period. Practitioners should not feel abandoned. Instead, they should feel continuously supported by experts whose guidance remains necessary until such time as the practitioners are confident enough to work independently. Targeted assessment of how well the practitioners are performing will serve as a strategy for meaningful and constructive feedback, while informing areas for further attention when planning the next training programmes.

9. Suggestion for Future Research

I had already mentioned above that I obtained the official list of the ECCE centres and their managers. The centres and practitioners who participated in the study were selected exclusively from the official list. By implication, practitioners at those 'unregistered centres' that did not participate in the study might have had additional useful perspectives that would have added to the quality of data collected from the practitioners at the registered centres in the communities. As a result, I recommend further research that aims to include 'unregistered centres' to obtain a more balanced view of the experiences of community-based practitioners by comparing the experiences of registered and unregistered centres.

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