



# Challenges impeding practitioners' proper implementation of mathematical play practice environment: A qualitative phenomenological research approach



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## ABSTRACT

*This research explored the challenges impeding practitioners' proper implementation of mathematical play practice environment using a qualitative phenomenological research approach. This study was conducted in Motheo District which is in Mangaung Municipality in the Free State with ten females who had obtained matric certificate qualification at least have three years' experience working in the ECCE setting as the sample. This sample was purposively chosen for this research. A structured interview guide was used as tool for data collection and its trustworthiness was properly ensured. After the data had been collected, the real processing, analysis, and interpretation of the data took place. We conducted a thematic analysis of the data. With the help of this technique, we were able to analyze the unstructured interview responses and find trends and themes. It was found that the challenges impeding practitioners' proper mathematical play practice environment are constraints to proper mathematical play in relation to indoor and outdoor resources and infrastructure; constraints emanating from practitioners' qualifications and constraints relating to support expected from the DSD and DBE, as custodians of ECCE. This finding has practical and policy implications in the sense that the practitioners cannot effectively implement mathematical play practice environment in the presence of the identified challenges unless adequate policy framework is designed to take care of such challenges. Thus, it is recommended that the appropriate authority should design an implementable policy guideline on the use of mathematical play practice environment.*

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## Introduction

Given the distinctive attributes of mathematics education in the ECCE setting, practitioners must follow a unique approach, which revolves around how children learn in the ECCE setting. The approach to leaning mathematics should be based on the principle of integration and play-based learning. Practitioners should discover and adapt their practices according to this approach (DBE, 2011). Practitioners play a major role in advocating for appropriate practices to stimulate mathematical concepts, among these practices are purposeful play, child-directed play, scaffolding and mediation that follow children's intuition in the ECCE setting (Feza, 2016).

A study conducted by Pyle, Poliszczuk and Danniels (2018) reveals that children's play occupies an important role in the ECCE setting, and the role of the teacher is vital for nurturing children's early personal and social development through learner-centred activities that will assist children to construct new ideas. Pyle et al. (2018) states that play is often thought to be the primary occupation of children, and its potential for learning and development has been explored in research for decades. Scholars declare that play is a natural activity of human beings, mainly during the first years of life, and it acquires key, relevant elements from a pedagogical point of view at the level of ECE (Bastías, Flores-Lueg, Gonzalez, Espinoza & Tronscoso, 2021).

Delgado-Rebolledo and Zakaryan (2020) found that the focus in teaching mathematics in the ECCE setting should be strongly directed to teachers' content knowledge. In addition, teachers' understanding of mathematics education and their reflection on their

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mathematics education teaching practices should assist them to understand the subject and to implement the knowledge. The development of each practitioner in the ECCE setting should be rooted in their pedagogical content knowledge in their everyday lives. During play-based learning, teachers' practices will be determined, to a large extent, by the depth of their pedagogical content knowledge.

Since the introduction of ECCE from a global to a local context, it has become clear that children in this setting need to be engaged in stimulating activities that support their mathematics education. This is not always the case, as practitioners in this area face constraints that impede them from adopting play-based learning practices. These constraints are challenges that emanate from teachers' inadequate qualifications, the absence of teacher development programmes, a lack of pedagogical knowledge on play-based practices, a lack of content knowledge on play-based practices, and shortages of teaching and learning resources. These constraints are complicated further by a shortage of ECCE personnel in rural contexts, unrealistic practitioner–learner ratios and classroom overcrowding, a lack of parental support, and the rural context itself.

Gray and Ryan (2016) found that there is a shortage of qualified staff to enact play and play-based learning and that practitioners lack knowledge of how children learn and play. However, Minimansurovich (2014) found that conditions for teachers' qualifications have changed through training and professional retraining. Discussions indicate that teachers should improve their qualifications to meet the required standards. Kalimullin (2014) revealed that there is no perfect monitoring system to check practitioners' competencies or to facilitate and formalise their qualifications. Shareefa et al. (2019) found that teachers' experience, qualifications, and their potential to teach, influence their perceptions of differentiated learning, as they lack the expertise to apply this strategy in teaching and learning in early years, particularly regarding mathematical play. Holmqvist (2019) also refers to a shortage of qualified teachers, which is a global challenge in both Sweden and South Africa. Both countries endorse the right to good quality education for all without limitation, which is hard to achieve if governments cannot provide schools with qualified teachers.

Smets and Struyven (2020) found that many teachers are unable to teach in diverse classrooms, as they are not professionally trained to teach in such classrooms. Beltramo (2017) found that it is vital to provide teachers with learning opportunities that resonate with students' contexts, as well as their individual interests, social needs and learning preferences. However, the practitioners are not doing this, due to inadequate professional development (Beltramo, 2017). Kalimullin (2014) found that the content of courses and professional retraining of teachers is outdated, mainly because few institutions are able to develop tailor-made programmes for teachers to implement teaching and learning effectively. Setoromo and Hadebe-Ndlovu (2020) found that teachers possessed limited knowledge and understanding of the professional domains that each teacher should possess to teach effectively in any discipline. Daries (2017) found that teachers who work with the birth-to-four-year age group have very few opportunities for professional growth and career-pathing.

Kotzé (2017) found that ECE schools are faced with a lack of infrastructure, and a lack of support from municipalities, which compromised learning environments, and lead to poor staff performance. Panthi and Belbase (2017) found that there is shortage of teaching aids and textbooks, too little time for students to master the content, a lack of clear objectives for teaching and learning in mathematics, and generally, a shortage of hands-on resources for classroom practice. Teachers are struggling to combine theory with practice. Mubashar et al. (2020) found that practitioners' implementation of the ECCE curriculum is ignored by policymakers in education. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) found that there is a shortage of staff in remote rural communities, that attracting and retaining teachers was difficult, and that means to maintain professional learning, so that teachers kept up with new curriculum developments, were lacking. Consequently, factors that affect teaching practices in the ECCE setting are not studied in depth in relation to the South African ECCE context, and issues relating to shortages of teaching and learning material in the ECCE setting are not addressed.

In the light of the above gaps in literature, the researchers sought to explore the challenges impeding practitioners' proper implementation of mathematical play practice environment in South African context.

## **Methodology: A qualitative phenomenological research design**

In this study, a qualitative phenomenological research design was adopted. The social and cultural context of this design, as well as the actions and interactions that interpret the situation of participants, were factors in its selection. By employing phenomenology, we were able to openly and continuously consider the impact that our preconditions and assumptions may have on the study process. This design has been adopted by Thwala et al. (2020), Thwala et al. (2022), Nhase et al (2021), Baloyi-Mothibeli et al. (2021), Gqoli et al. (2022), Gqoli et al. (2023).

The scope of this study was restricted to the Motheo District in the Free State's Mangaung Municipality. In the Mangaung township, these centers were located in three different informal settlements. In each informal settlement, we concentrated on no more than two centers.

Ten female practitioners comprised the research sample. These practitioners had at least three years of experience working in an ECCE environment. To choose study participants, purposive sampling was utilized. In order to accurately represent a group, participants were chosen because they could give the necessary data for the study. We selected five participants who had experience of teaching children who were three years old, and another five were selected because they had experience of teaching four-year-old

children. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data for the research. Interviews were conducted because they are effective at gathering data in more complicated circumstances, helpful for gathering in-depth information, and have a wide range of applications. The trustworthiness of the instrument was ensured by giving it to experts to read and read the items of the interview guide over time. The researchers after obtaining the ethical approval for the research, proceeded to the various ECCE centres in the district to conduct the interview with the sampled participants. We interviewed two practitioners, one in charge of the three-year-olds and the other the four-year-olds, at each of these five community-based centers. We created an interview protocol to achieve the necessary coverage of the areas of enquiry and comparability of information between participants because data in qualitative research is obtained through a set of planned questions relevant to the topic of enquiry. Data collected were analysed thematically from where theme and sub-themes emerged. By categorizing the feedback and connecting related topics, coding was utilized to enable us to perform a deeper study of each response provided by the respondents. This allowed us to quickly spot links between different categories and themes.

## Results

### **Theme: Challenges impeding a proper mathematical play practice environment**

The diverse nature of the ECCE environment poses challenges that hinder practitioners from engaging children in proper mathematical play practice in the ECCE environment. These challenges will be discussed under sub-themes 1 to 3.

#### **Sub-Theme 1: Constraints to proper mathematical play in relation to indoor and outdoor resources and infrastructure**

In the Motheo district, practitioners and children face an array of challenges, among others, poor support from government, a lack of quality education on the side of practitioners, poverty, poor health services provided by government in the ECCE and lack of sanitary facilities. All these factors have an impact on teaching and mathematical play-based learning in the ECCE setting. These constraints are confirmed by Mabaso (2017:47), who reports a lack of educational tools and facilities, few adequately qualified teachers and high teacher-learner ratios, and a shortage of early childhood services, resulting in most learners being academically disadvantaged. Furthermore, participants confirmed these statements with the following affirmations.

*P1: Challenges we are facing is that we have is that, sometimes in our classes we do not have enough space, so that all the children can participate. Even if you use your own language, their own language, they cannot understand. They need to see something concrete for to be able to learn.*

*P4: I would find it very challenging for me because in my class I have a child with a disability in a way that I must also focus on the child. Children then fall behind and another challenge is that we lack resource and space to teach mathematical play.*

*P6: At this school, it is a little bit difficult, because we do not employ male to help us to maintain the outdoor equipment. You cannot just get it and then you do not look after it, so in my planning for every year and when we are doing budget. I buy salt instead of chlorine for the sandpit maintenance then once a month.*

*P7: Challenges faced by learners with a learning disability that affects performance in mathematics. No referrals for these children with such problems. I am not qualified and this makes difficult for to teach such learners Overcrowded classrooms, infrastructure of the centre, resources such as learning materials and funding are lacking.*

From the comments of participants above, I conclude that practitioners collectively face multiple challenges that prevent them from engaging children in proper mathematical play practices in the ECCE environment. These constraints include those posed by the indoor and outdoor area and range from a lack of space, poor infrastructure, lack of resources and overcrowding of ECCE classrooms (P1, P4 and P7). In turn, P1 reported that language posed a barrier that makes it impossible for some children to understand mathematical play-based learning in the ECCE setting. Some practitioners reported being stretched beyond their expertise, as they were facing the challenge of teaching children with disabilities, without access to guidance on how to refer these children to a relevant specialist or school (P4 and P7). One of the participants stated that there were no men appointed by the ECCE centres to assist with maintenance of indoor and outdoor equipment (P6). Most practitioners experienced similar constraints, which made it difficult for them to engage children in mathematical play-based learning in the ECCE setting.

#### **Sub-Theme 2: Constraints emanating from practitioners' qualifications**

Qualified, skilled practitioners are required to implement mathematical play-based learning in the ECCE setting. According to Jawawi (2019:222), teachers' experience and qualifications influence their perceptions of differentiated teaching. Some teachers lack the expertise and knowledge to implement a differentiated teaching strategy in the early years, with specific reference to mathematical play-based learning. During my conversations with participants on challenges that impede them from implementing mathematical play effectively, as per sub-theme 3.2, they reported as follows:

*P1: Now, I have, B Ed. in Foundation Phase. I just finished now but I did not get job that is paying me enough, I am working in this centre while I am looking for the job that matches my qualification.*

*P5: Yes. We do not have the same qualification like other practitioners. I have only Grade 11. In most of the time, I have to ask other practitioner what I must do for the lesson. If we can at least go to school; or have somebody who will train us to teach small children in the preschool or have a workshop; it will at least balance our education.*

*P7: I am not sure whether there is any institution locally which can give us relevant requirement and qualification for ECCE practitioners except the TVET where we study, I studied ECD NQF Level 4. I am studying my ECD NQF Level 5 now, which has mathematics as its core module.*

*P10: Yes, I studied Level 4 ECD. By the way, it was a long time ago and I hear now that they are saying, it is not really weighed and valued that much. Now there is many opportunities out there, but now I have only done ECD [Level 4], I cannot go to higher institutions.*

The comments above indicate that the majority of participants (P4, P7, P9, P10) are educated to Level 4 ECD. Only one participant reported that they had a B Ed for foundation phase. In the ECCE setting, practitioners' educational backgrounds and their training as child workers are an important requirement that continues to be raised all over the world as one of the most accurate predictors a child's holistic development. Therefore, it is vital that practitioners obtain adequate qualifications, so that they can engage children in mathematical play learning in the ECCE setting.

Findings that emanated from the data reveal that the most common challenge facing practitioners is that they do not have adequate qualifications to teach in the ECCE setting. Consequently, they are unable to engage children in the proper mathematical play-based education, with the exception of P1, who is qualified, but looking for a position that matches her qualification better.

**Sub-Theme 3:** Constraints relating to support expected from the DSD and DBE, as custodians of ECCE

In the current situation, function shifts are taking place between the DBE and DSD. This migration leaves most of practitioners unsure about their future career in the ECCE setting. They are unsure which of the two departments is responsible for their professional development, will provide funding for their centres, and provide teaching and learning resources. Their concerns were expressed in one of the interview sessions, when they were asked about the support they expected from the DSD and DoE, as custodians of ECCE.

*P4: I want to expect funding so that we can go to university of improve my qualification and also to buy resources for the kids and make better classes for the kids.*

*P7: Training, on-site support for practitioners, programmes for play-base mathematics indoor and outdoor equipment that can be used for mathematical play e.g. trampolines, unfix blocks to be provided.*

*P9: Okay, so I think that Social Development, there should be a clear understanding of how they were running things, so that the Department of Education can, it is not that big of a move for people. But I also expect from the Department of Education, that when they see there is a need or something that was missed, that they do implement it and bring it in.*

Participants had different views on the responsibilities of the DSD and DBE, for instance, P4 indicated that funding for practitioners to improve their qualifications and purchase resources is expected from two departments. P7 commented that receiving on-site training and programmes on play-based learning, with special reference to that needed for mathematics indoor and outdoor play, will be useful to them. P10 indicated that the two departments should clarify their duties and implement arrangements accordingly. This shows that there is still uncertainty among practitioners on how the two departments will support them and their role in ECCE.

## Discussion

Due to the paucity of literature on the challenges confronting the proper implementation of mathematical play practices among practitioners in South Africa, this research was necessitated. The outcome of this phenomenological research showed that ECCE practitioners are confronted with so many challenges in the implementation of mathematical play practices. These challenges are not limited to lack of proper mathematical play in relation to indoor and outdoor resources and infrastructure; problem of unqualified practitioners' and constraints relating to support expected from the DSD and DBE, as custodians of ECCE. It was found that some teachers lack the expertise and knowledge to implement a differentiated teaching strategy in the early years, with specific reference to mathematical play-based learning. In the Motheo district, practitioners and children face an array of challenges, among others, poor support from government, a lack of quality education on the side of practitioners, poverty, poor health services provided by government in the ECCE and lack of sanitary facilities. All these factors have an impact on teaching and mathematical play-based learning in the ECCE setting. These constraints are confirmed by Mabaso (2017), who reports a lack of educational tools and facilities, few adequately qualified teachers and high teacher-learner ratios, and a shortage of early childhood services, resulting in most learners being academically disadvantaged.

Buttressing these findings, Shareefa et al. (2019) found that teachers' experience, qualifications, and their potential to teach, influence their perceptions of differentiated learning, as they lack the expertise to apply this strategy in teaching and learning in early years, particularly regarding mathematical play. Holmqvist (2019) also refers to a shortage of qualified teachers, which is a global challenge in both Sweden and South Africa. Both countries endorse the right to a good quality education for all without limitation, which is

hard to achieve if governments cannot provide schools with qualified teachers. Smets and Struyven (2020) found that many teachers are unable to teach in diverse classrooms, as they are not professionally trained to teach in such classrooms. Beltramo (2017) found that it is vital to provide teachers with learning opportunities that resonate with students' contexts, as well as their individual interests, social needs and learning preferences. Kalimullin (2014) found that the content of courses and professional retraining of teachers is outdated, mainly because few institutions are able to develop tailor-made programmes for teachers to implement teaching and learning effectively. Setoromo and Hadebe-Ndlovu (2020) found that teachers possessed limited knowledge and understanding of the professional domains that each teacher should possess to teach effectively in any discipline. Daries (2017) found that teachers who work with the birth-to-four-year age group have very few opportunities for professional growth and career-pathing. However, Beltramo (2017) found that practitioners are not doing this, due to inadequate professional development.

Kotzé (2017) found that ECE schools are faced with a lack of infrastructure, and a lack of support from municipalities, which compromised learning environments, and lead to poor staff performance. Panthi and Belbase (2017) found that there is shortage of teaching aids and textbooks, too little time for students to master the content, a lack of clear objectives for teaching and learning in mathematics, and generally, a shortage of hands-on resources for classroom practice. Teachers are struggling to combine theory with practice. Mubashar et al. (2020) found that practitioners' implementation of the ECCE curriculum is ignored by policymakers in education. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) found that there is a shortage of staff in remote rural communities, that attracting and retaining teachers was difficult, and that means to maintain professional learning, so that teachers kept up with new curriculum developments, were lacking.

## Conclusion

Considering the fact that factors that affect teaching practices in the ECCE setting are not studied in depth in relation to the South African ECCE context, and issues relating to shortages of teaching and learning material in the ECCE setting are not addressed, this research has established that practitioners face a lot of challenges in the implementation of mathematical play practices. Thus, lack of proper implementation of mathematical play practices in different ECCE centres in the South African context is attributed to lack of adequate indoor and outdoor resources and infrastructure; problem of unqualified practitioners' and constraints relating to support expected from the DSD and DBE, as custodians of ECCE. Based on the above conclusion, it is recommended that the DBE should provide adequate policy framework that will support proper training of teachers for the implementation of mathematical play practices. Also, adequate provision of indoor and outdoor resources and infrastructure should be made.

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