

# **PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED IN MAINTAINING MOBILE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION CENTRES**

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## **Abstract**

In the South African context, there are early childhood development centres designated as mobile centres. These centres have been in operation for several years with the intention of bringing early learning to a teeming population of South African children. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is set to ensure a solid foundation for the education of children from birth to 9 years. This program is targeted at ensuring that children transit positively from early childhood care or pre-primary level to the primary level of education. The experiences children have in the early years of life are considered very paramount for their well-being and lifelong learning. However, literature is scarce on the educational activities of mobile ECCE centres. Based on this, the researchers explored the challenges encountered by the practitioners in maintaining mobile ECCE centres. The researchers adopted a qualitative research approach to guide the research. A sample of 10 practitioners in one organisation providing mobile ECCE in the Free State Province participated in this research. Necessary data for this research were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The trustworthiness of the qualitative research instrument was adequately ensured. The analysis of qualitative data was analysed using ATLAS.ti software. The results among others showed that one of the most challenges faced by the practitioners in operating a mobile ECCE programme is the language barrier as most children speak Sotho as their home language, while other children speak Tswana and Xhosa as well. Besides, it was found that practitioners deal with many psychosocial challenges, especially alcohol abuse by parents and poverty, which have grave effects on children's social and educational development. Other challenges found are rain, wind, cold and dust. Thus, these findings have strong policy implications for the fact that there is a need to have an ECCE policy framework that allows in-service training of practitioners in the different home languages of the children. This will help to equip them with the knowledge of the different home languages of the children in the mobile ECCE centres to mitigate the challenge of a language barrier.

Keywords: Challenges, Maintaining, Mobile Early Childhood Care and Education Centre, Practitioners.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

There are early childhood development centers that have been designated as mobile centers in the South African environment. These facilities have been running for a while with the goal of providing early learning to a throng of South African children. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program aims to provide children from birth to age 9 with a strong foundation for their education. The goal of this program is to ensure that kids transition successfully from early childhood education or pre-primary level to primary level of education. Evidence of lower school dropout and repetition rates provides solid support for the advantages of early childhood development (ECD) programs [1]. Early experiences in a child's life are thought to be extremely important to their wellbeing and capacity for lifetime learning. Early education for children is highly advised because of the benefits it brings to schools, kids, families, and the government [2]. However, to ensure that Grade R instruction can continue, almost 20 000 underqualified Grade R instructors are currently on duty in South Africa [3]. Most nations have experienced difficulties at the executive level of early childhood education, and more research is needed to identify the obstacles and successful solutions to overcome them in order to increase the participation of men [4]. Additionally, men's involvement in matters pertaining to maternal and fetal health is low in Iran, and there have been few research done on the reasons for this as well as any obstacles to men's involvement [4].

It has been discovered that early childhood education stakeholders in South Africa are dealing with a number of crises that adversely affect their capacity to contribute to the early social and educational development of their children [5]. Reporting further, [5] noted that stakeholders lamented their strained ties with the moms of their offspring. Fathers reported a lot of emotional anger at being in a situation

where they were powerless to speak up and be recognized as full men due to a lack of resources. For men, this mental state is a major source of stress. Failure to provide for one's child then creates a secondary circumstance where the mother of the child may choose to disregard the man's presence due to his limitations. In a similar study, [6] reported that although parents were aware of their responsibility, some did not participate, giving a variety of explanations for why. This study discovered that factors including labor migration, alienated relationships, drug and alcohol misuse, indifference, and unemployment lead to poverty, which makes it difficult for fathers to actively participate in their children's social development because they don't spend enough time with them [6].

According to [3], early childhood development centers face a number of challenges and needs, including the need for resources, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of parental involvement, crowded classrooms, a need for in-service training, the needs of rural communities, and assistance from an open distance learning (ODL) institution. Early childhood development (ECD) practitioners in South Africa face challenges of proper teaching and learning, management and leadership, the environment for ECD, and ECD laws and policies [7]. As a result, [7] opined that joining larger organizations and well-established communities of practice will be advantageous for the organization involved in this study to increase access to and availability of practitioner training and resources. Citing the works of Labantwana among others, [7] reported that these difficulties in providing high-quality ECE have a variety of causes. Since most children in South Africa are born into poverty and formal education was not made mandatory until 2020, many kids do not have access to ECD programs, including ECE. Also, citing Williams and Samuels, [7] a significant portion of ECD professionals (78%) lack the necessary credentials to teach at the preschool level, and 23% lack any kind of training. In South African Early Childhood Development (ECD) settings, leadership is crucial to enhancing and maintaining quality [8]. Low rates of primary school survival and restricted access to health care and nutritional intervention are the results of the lack of access to and poor quality of ECD programs and services [9]. However, [8] showed that most participants knew very little about the ECD policy and how it was being implemented and the policymakers also lacked the leadership necessary to guarantee that the ECD implementation guidelines were followed, encouraged, and carried out. South African Black students enroll in higher education at a rate of over 72%, but only a tiny fraction of them pick and finish the program in Early Childhood Education (ECE) [10]. The social, educational, cultural, and economic backgrounds of the students may contribute in part to this low throughput rate, which is reflected in different levels of preparedness for studies in higher education. A limited number of rich learners in South Africa attend well-resourced state schools or private institutions where they obtain decent to great education [10]. However, the bulk of students (about 80%) are dependent on under-resourced, dysfunctional rural and township schools [10].

The foregoing has shown that studies have been conducted on the status of early childhood development in South Africa. A lot of issues have been raised regarding the challenges facing the management of conventional ECCE centers. However, the literature is silent on the practitioners' challenges in the management of mobile ECCE activities in South Africa. Thus, this research explored the challenges encountered by the practitioners in maintaining mobile ECCE centres.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The researchers adopted a qualitative research approach to guide the research. Specifically, a phenomenological research design guided the research. A sample of 10 practitioners in one organisation providing mobile ECCE in the Free State Province participated in this research. These participants were purposively sampled for the study to suit the objectives of the research. Necessary data for this research were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The trustworthiness of the interview guide was ensured by subjecting it to thorough reading by different specialists in qualitative research method. Before the conduct of interview sessions, an ethical approval certificate was issued by the Faculty of Education committee on research ethics of the University of the Free State. Besides, gatekeeper letters were obtained from the mobile centers used for the research. Thereafter, different interview sessions were conducted for the participants at their various mobile centers. The analysis of qualitative data was done using ATLAS.ti software.

## **3 RESULTS**

The results were presented based on the themes that emerged during the data analysis.

### 3.1 Theme 1: Languages barrier.

It is crucial to first mention that most children speak Sotho as their home language. However, there are also Tswana and Xhosa speaking children as well. The language barrier becomes an issue mostly in relation to children from neighbouring countries, especially children from Zimbabwe who speak Shona.

Below are the extracts from the participants' responses

**Participant 1 responded thus** *"Yes, we have the Shonas, but we learn the Shona because we have the children who know the Sotho and Shauna so that they translate Sesotho with Shona children, but they are not".*

**Participant 2 responded thus** *"Especially when it comes to language for me, I'm a Tswana and they are Sotho, there are things I can say or do properly in Sotho, I have to ask my colleagues first".*

### 3.2 Theme 2: Psychosocial challenges, especially alcohol abuse by parents and poverty

**Participant 1 responded thus** *"Some children when their parents are fighting in the house, that children come at the play group and fight with other children. . . When the children are watching their parents doing something, I think they think that it is the right thing to do because it is normal [in the child's home]".*

**Participant 2 responded thus** *"Yes, we are having challenges when it comes to like on yesterday there was a child who was using vulgar language, the child lives near us, so we asked the child to call his parents. Then the child came with the father so, I asked the father why is the child using vulgar language to other children? So, the father told us the mother is not hands-on when it comes to raising the child, the mother is always drinking alcohol. . . The mother doesn't care, so it's only the father who is working".*

**Participant 3 responded thus** *"Most of the challenges that I can talk about with parents, most of our parents are alcoholics. They take a lot of alcohol and they don't take care of the children".*

**Participant 8 responded thus** *"The children are coming from poor families, families who are not able to pay at the day-care centres, we work with children whose parents don't have official identity documents (IDs), they don't have the children's birth certificates, but we still encouraging their parents to go to the Department of Home Affairs and register their children. If they don't succeed then we interact with the social workers and we explain to them the situation so that they can help the parents. We work with children whose parents are, they drink too much. Some parents are not working, so you find them going outside at the farms and hustle there. So, we struggle a lot when they are going to their farms, go and hustle for jobs, they took their children out of the session because they have to go and stay with them there at the farm. That's a very big challenge".*

**Participant 9 responded thus** *"The other challenge is hunger, people or those who are drinking a lot, those are the challenges so my suggestion to the government is to make sure that you know, these taverns that are always open and this spot that people are selling alcohol and these people that are selling drugs, the government can maybe take part to make sure that if they're saying this must be closed at this time or you cannot sell this without the license, I think it will help a lot".*

**Participant 10 responded thus** *"I've done a lot of house visits with the play groupers with the playground facilitators and Masetjane and I realize what difficult circumstances children are actually living under in the informal settlements".*

### 3.3 Theme 3: Rain, wind, cold and dust

**Participant 2 responded thus** *"Like the challenges that we are going through, it's because of the weather. It depends on the weather, if the weather is not right, like if it's raining and if it's windy, then we cannot work that day".*

**Participant 3 responded thus** *"The thing that makes us not to go to the children when it's raining it's because it's not going to be conducive for us and also for the children. But if we have a hall or any shelter to accommodate them, then it's going to be much better because we won't miss any sessions".*

**Participant 7 responded thus** *"Ok, our challenge is sometimes it's when it's winter, it's cold, so the other children, they don't have maybe shoes, they come with their barefoot. They don't have warm clothes, so, when we are having those gazebos, we have to close them".*

**Participant 8 responded thus** “We have to build gazebos (tents), then the weather doesn’t allow us sometimes, it’s very windy then the tents will blow away and sometimes there are too many children for one tent because we have two practitioners, so it’s one tent for each practitioner [but each tent can only take 20 children]”.

**Participant 10 responded thus** “*There are challenges, I think on very windy days and in cold days during winter, I think we are challenged by the weather given the nature of where we work*”.

## **4 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

This research sought to find out the challenges encountered by the practitioners in maintaining mobile ECCE centres using a qualitative research approach. It was empirically revealed that the challenges encountered by the practitioners in maintaining mobile ECCE centres include language barrier mostly in relation to children from neighbouring countries, especially children from Zimbabwe who speak Shona; many psychosocial challenges, especially alcohol abuse by parents and poverty, which have grave effects on children’s social and educational development; rain, wind, cold and dust which disrupt the operation of a mobile ECD programme. These findings are corroborated by related empirical findings.

According to [3], early childhood development centers face a number of challenges and needs, including the need for resources, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of parental involvement, crowded classrooms, a need for in-service training, the needs of rural communities, and assistance from an open distance learning (ODL) institution. Early childhood development (ECD) practitioners in South Africa face challenges of proper teaching and learning, management and leadership, the environment for ECD, and ECD laws and policies [7]. As a result, [7] opined that joining larger organizations and well-established communities of practice will be advantageous for the organization involved in this study to increase access to and availability of practitioner training and resources. Citing the works of Labantwana among others, [7] reported that these difficulties in providing high-quality ECE have a variety of causes. Since most children in South Africa are born into poverty and formal education was not made mandatory until 2020, many kids do not have access to ECD programs, including ECE. Also, citing Williams and Samuels, [7] a significant portion of ECD professionals (78%) lack the necessary credentials to teach at the preschool level, and 23% lack any kind of training.

In South African Early Childhood Development (ECD) settings, leadership is crucial to enhancing and maintaining quality [8]. Low rates of primary school survival and restricted access to health care and nutritional intervention are the results of the lack of access to and poor quality of ECD programs and services [9]. However, [8] showed that most participants knew very little about the ECD policy and how it was being implemented and the policymakers also lacked the leadership necessary to guarantee that the ECD implementation guidelines were followed, encouraged, and carried out.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this research have shown that mobile ECCE practitioners encounter a number of challenges in the maintenance of the centers. This by implication indicates that the management of mobile ECCE centers in Bloemfontein South Africa cannot be effective in the face of these challenges. Thus, the researchers recommend that appropriate education authorities in charge of the mobile centers should make frantic efforts in creating enabling environment devoid of such challenges in order to give the learners quality mobile ECCE learning.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The researchers appreciate all the practitioners who participated actively in the course of this research work. All the coordinators of the different mobile EDC centers used for the study are equally appreciated. Most importantly, the Director and management of Hosken Consolidated Investments Foundation (HCIF) Cape Town, South Africa are appreciated sincerely for funding the research that birthed this conference paper.

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