


# Shaping the landscape of early childhood education: An overview of two special issues

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This editorial speaks to the online publication of two of the *South African Journal of Childhood Education's* (SAJCE) special issues. The articles in these publications not only span the geography of South Africa but also stretch further afield to places like Thailand, Finland, Turkey, Botswana and Lesotho.

A common thread throughout the offerings is challenges and considerations related to the differences in practice and resources between teachers working in rural areas as opposed to urban classrooms. These present social justice issues such as poor training and qualifications, access to decent wages and inadequate infrastructure. There is a call for professionalising of the Early Childhood Care and Education sector, which began through the Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (PiECCE) in 2017 and is now gaining momentum with the rolling out of various qualifications related to this age group at different initial teacher training institutions. A further common thread is that of schoolification and teachers who are poorly trained tending towards overly formalised learning, no understanding of policy to practice and the setting of unrealistic goals that do not take into account the needs of the child. The usual themes of play as an essential part of early learning together with the need to develop the whole child, remain as validation that we now need to consciously and actively address how we can implement what we know is right. We have enough research to confirm key understandings around what quality early childhood education (ECD) looks like – we now need to act! A less common theme, but definitely one, that is gaining traction is that of the agency and voice of the child. The child is being perceived as moving from a place of being passive and powerless to one that should be heard and engaged with. The latter is a profound shift in understanding and is one that will take time to implement in practice.

It is not surprising that across the two SAJCE issues, there are multiple articles addressing what needs to happen when preparing teachers to face the crisis in education in South Africa. These included recognising the need for ongoing mentorship outside the scope of a training programme, training teachers to incorporate more physical movement into their lessons, developing music and art skills to enhance the child's holistic development and improving teachers' language skills to ensure better communication between teachers and children.

The issue of language is almost always the elephant in the room, when it comes to talking about education in South Africa. It is addressed across a variety of articles from looking at how school readiness may be impacted through the language of the child to more current angles related to language, namely using digital play to develop language and a mobile health resource to encourage parents to develop the language skills of their children. The digital approach appears to receive some pushback related to lack of devices, suspicion as to what the value is in digital techniques and lack of training or knowledge. Given that coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) created a *fast-forward button* on all things digital, it becomes highly relevant that these issues are tackled. Other articles related to digital approaches show the development of programmes specific to the sciences and how initial teacher education (ITE) is empowering students to be positive about the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Without a doubt, South Africa will need to resolve problems such as load-shedding, cost of data, access to relevant devices and specific relevant training in technology before we will truly see the progress and benefits we would like in this regard.

A number of articles looked at inclusive education and the need for support for teachers and learners engaged in this aspect of education. The shift from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) was seen to be an opportunity for a revisiting of the types of support given to teachers in the classroom. Attention deficit disorder (ADD) was a

**Note:** Special Collection: Early Childhood Development in Theory and Practice.

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specific challenge that was raised with a view to recognising the need for teachers to be trained on how to support such learners, whilst innovations such as concept education programme were discussed as a way to improve the learner's visual perceptual skills. It was interesting to note that relative to all the articles submitted across the two SAJCE issues, very few address the challenges related to learning support. One can surmise that this may be related to teachers simply being too overwhelmed to even go there or that perhaps insufficient research is happening in this domain.

There were a few articles that did not neatly fit into any one category but which have an impact on early education as a whole and are therefore worth noting. The first is one related to the role of teenage pregnancy and its effects on the academic trajectory of the child. This aspect has a direct relation to the work that people in the ECD sector do when dealing with parents. Parents are not necessarily the traditional westernised parent comprising of a father and mother, but often a grandmother or young teen who may not have the tools or understanding to be present for the needs of their child or grandchild. Inevitably, the consequences of this type of upbringing may be significant. A further topic of interest is the role of the male in

ECD settings. This study showed that whilst teachers acknowledge that a male practitioner can perform a vital role in the life of the child, social norms and values remain problematic meaning that it will continue to be the exception rather than the rule. The use of the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) as a tool to track the development of children in ECD was revisited to determine its efficacy. The strategy of re-evaluating a research tool is a sound one and was found to be reliable. Whilst we may shy away from trying to quantify human development, this type of research tool can assist us in determining through empirical evidence, areas that require attention. The last and most current topic was the use of litigation and social mobilisation to address ECD issues that were highlighted through the advent of COVID-19. It was concluded that both strategies can have a profound impact to bring about the much-needed change in the sector.

In conclusion, the two special issues that SAJCE has compiled demonstrate the variety and diversity of the early childhood landscape. They serve as a reminder of not only the sheer volume of work that still needs to be done but also what is already emerging as the result of passionate individuals in the field. It is evident that now is the time for active change.