

# Enhancing the well-being of early childhood education practitioners working in resource-constrained contexts

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**Background:** The recent migration of early childhood care and education function brought with it many changes that affect the workplace well-being of practitioners and centre managers, yet little research has reported on the voices and experiences of those working on the ground.

**Aim:** To find out the current state of well-being of practitioners working in resource-constrained contexts to help us theorise how might they take action to improve it.

**Setting:** Early childhood care and education centres in rural and township areas in six different provinces.

**Methods:** The first author conducted 10 semi-structured focus group interviews with 80 practitioners recruited by collaborating researchers at various universities. All ethical protocols were adhered to. The focus groups were audio-taped, transcribed and thematically analysed independently by the two authors before reaching consensus.

**Results:** Two themes were identified: (1) participants experienced negative emotions arising from both internal and systemic aspects that were affecting their well-being. (2) Several factors promoted the well-being of practitioners despite their difficult circumstances.

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings, it appears that close collaboration among practitioners within centres and, with other external stakeholders, was an important factor for enhanced well-being. Drawing from action learning theory, we suggest how practitioners can collaborate to sustain their well-being while addressing the challenges they face.

**Contribution:** This collaborative action learning approach can be applied not only by ECCE centres, but to any organisation wishing to improve the well-being and practice of their members.

**Keywords:** early childhood education; critical action learning; community of practice; community hubs; positive psychology; capability theory.

## Introduction: Background

Early childhood education (ECE) covering birth to 5 years has been, until relatively recently, a neglected component of public policy in South Africa. As a result, private ECE centres and playgroups have mushroomed in informal settlements and other impoverished areas. These provide much-needed income for some 200 000 (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2022) mainly black, unqualified and underqualified women and opportunity for many more to enter the labour market. Despite ECE contributing in this way to the economy and to the future social well-being of the country through early education of the poorest children, the practitioners who work in this field receive less than minimum wage, no benefits and work in under-resourced facilities (Wood & Neethling 2023). Parents in these communities cannot afford to pay even modest fees although almost half of such centres receive no government funding and depend on fees to survive. In a country where unemployment is over 30% (Statistics South Africa 2023), the ability of parents to pay for education is severely impacted, and so the sustainability of the sector is threatened. Those centres who are registered with government only receive enough to cover around 27% of their operational costs (DBE 2022). The government recognises the importance of ECE for the economic and social well-being of the country and aims to provide universal access for children aged 0–5 years to quality ECE (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2013; RSA 2015). The decision was taken in 2019 to move the responsibility for ECE from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the DBE in an attempt to better meet the developmental and early learning needs of children from birth to 5 years (Ebrahim et al. 2022) by moving towards professionalisation and gradual absorption into the public sector. This transfer of responsibility is referred to as the function shift.

However, the public sector does not have the resources to cope with the circa 5 million children who fall into the 0–5 age category (DBE 2022). The DBE recognises that the private sector, currently hardly sustainable, will have to be supported and is working hard to create structures and policies to help them to provide quality ECE while becoming sustainable businesses (DBE 2023). But the wheels of government turn slowly, and meanwhile the severe challenges facing the ECE workforce (Visser et al. 2021) are impacting negatively on their workplace well-being. Workplace well-being refers to how workers feel about the quality of the social and physical environment, how valued they feel and how engaged they are in their work (Aryanti, Sari & Widiarta 2020). Thus, there is a need to investigate how practitioners are navigating the function shift and explore possibilities to help them improve their sense of well-being, as this ultimately impacts on their practice. As far as we know, no research has specifically focused on the well-being of practitioners teaching children aged 0–5 years in resource-constrained contexts in South Africa. Most of the research conducted to date on ECE practitioner well-being has been in countries where ECE is already part of the public education system and the workforce comprises qualified teachers who are recognised as professionals (Benevene et al. 2018; Beltman et al. 2019; Thorpe et al. 2020:623). Although ECE teachers in these countries also face challenges and may be accorded less status and material benefits than teachers working in higher grades (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2019), they mostly have had the benefit of higher quality training, enjoy better conditions of service and are not working in such poverty-stricken contexts as their South African counterparts. The myriad social, economic and health factors associated with living and working in such environments and the informality of the sector (Wood & Neethling 2023) means that it is very difficult to generalise findings from more developed ECE sectors to the South African context.

The authors of this article represent the Education Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA) Research Chair in Early Childhood, tasked with identifying how best to partner with government to support skills development in the ECE sector. While we recognise that skills development is vital, we argue that the motivation to gain and implement skills depends on the well-being of the workforce (Cann et al. 2023; Shirley, Hargreaves & Washington-Wangia 2020). This article presents evidence to show that the well-being of ECE practitioners in South Africa is threatened on several levels. We use these findings to suggest an action learning (AL) framework to enhance collaboration between ECE stakeholders at the local level, which in turn will elicit positive emotions, build relationships and impart a sense of meaning and achievement among practitioners (Seligman 2018) to improve their well-being.

The article begins with a discussion of how we conceptualise practitioner well-being. We then present the methodology

we followed in gathering and analysing the data, before critically discussing the findings. Based on our findings, we suggest an AL framework for improving practitioner well-being. Our aims with this study were to, firstly, find out the current state of ECE practitioner well-being in township and rural settings at this time of change and, secondly, to theorise how they could take action to improve it, given that the political, economic and social environments present many challenges that will only improve slowly, if at all.

## A positive psychology approach to practitioner well-being

We adopt a holistic view of well-being that includes the subjective physical, psychological, emotional, social, financial and spiritual health of the practitioner while also recognising the external, systemic factors that can increase or detract from feelings of well-being (Liu, Song & Maio 2018). These latter factors in South Africa include a severe lack of resources and funds, poor infrastructure, no job security and an unqualified workforce who has the added burden of helping children navigate the traumas associated with living in extreme poverty. Individual well-being cannot therefore be separated from the social, economic and political state of the country and sector (Wood & Neethling 2023). Well-being is not a static state but fluctuates over time and context (Dodge et al. 2012), implying that individuals have the power to improve it through changing their attitudes, behaviour or environment. For this reason, we favour a positive psychological standpoint, focusing on using existing assets and resources to improve functioning (Wissing et al. 2021) to attain positive feelings, improved mental health and a feeling of happiness (Seligman 2018). Seligman's PERMA model proposes five pillars of well-being that can be applied to the workplace: positive emotions (feeling good); engagement (with work and activities); relationships (connection with others); meaning (finding purpose in work) and sense of achievement (I can make a difference). Well-being has both hedonic (functioning well) and eudaimonic (feeling well) aspects, and so it is not enough just to be able to do things well, you have to feel good about doing them (Wissing et al. 2021). Positive psychology is not oriented towards alleviating suffering, but on supporting people to flourish by building the enabling conditions that they perceive as important to them and that help them not just survive but also thrive (Seligman 2018:334). The Positive Psychology Center at Penn State University, with whom Seligman is associated, professes:

There are many different routes to a flourishing life ... A good life for one person is not necessarily a good life for another. Positive Psychology is descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, we are not telling people what choices to make or what to value, but research on the factors that enable flourishing can help people make more informed choices to live a more fulfilling life that is aligned with their values and interests. (Seligman 2018 ,n.p)

We find this approach to align well with the principles of Sen's (1993) capability theory of development, which

recognises that marginalised people are perfectly able to improve their own lives, given an opportunity to do so. Once they experience a sense of belonging and that their contributions are recognised as valid, they become more engaged, feel more confident and thus are more likely to move to action to attain the changes they want to see (Stiglitz 2011). Working in collaboration with like-minded others can help practitioners to generate shared innovations to improve, in this case, their working experiences in the ECE sector. Such ways of working tend to attract others once they see the outcomes it can attain (Norberg et al. 2013). Underpinning all this is the recognition that local knowledge is central to the development of sustainable policy and practice (West, van Kerkhoff & Wagenaar 2019). We now explain the research methods used to arrive at the findings.

## Research methods and design

Following a qualitative approach and design (Allan 2020), 10 semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with 80 female practitioners in six different provinces of South Africa to answer the question 'What is the state of the holistic wellbeing of practitioners working in resource constrained contexts and how might they take action to improve it?' Participants were identified by the ECD Chair collaborators in higher education institutions in the specific provinces of the ECD centres with whom they had existing research relationships. The practitioners and managers were invited by these collaborators to participate in the audio-recorded focus groups, conducted by the first author, after being informed of the purpose of the study. All participants signed written informed consent and were apprised of their right to have their input deleted should they wish. All data were kept on a restricted access cloud. To improve trustworthiness (Adler 2022), data were thematically analysed independently by the two authors, before coming together to reach consensus.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the university concerned (NWU-01039-21-A2), attesting to its adherence to the ethical principles of justice, respect for persons and beneficence.

## Discussion of results

Thematic analysis revealed that practitioners and centre managers were concerned and uncertain about their future and the future of the children, leading to stress, fatigue and fear, which impacted negatively on their well-being. However, they did find meaning in their work and were committed to doing their best for the children in their care. The following section presents the themes, substantiated by verbatim extracts from the data and supported by relevant

literature. The various provinces are indicated by their abbreviations (FS = Free State; GP = Gauteng; KZN = Kwa-Zulu Natal; MP = Mpumalanga; NC = Northern Cape; NW = North West); followed by the number of the focus group and the participant number.

### Theme 1: Negative emotions arising from both internal and systemic aspects

The practitioners reported feelings of fear, depression and fatigue. The absence of positive emotions is perhaps the main determinant of low levels of well-being and negatively affects all other markers such as relationships, engagement, finding purpose in life and a sense of accomplishment. In reality, all overlap but we discuss them separately here to aid understanding.

Anxiety and frustration seemed to be the dominant emotion among the participants in the various focus groups, particularly those who had not managed to register their early learning programme (ELP) with the DBE:

'Like the government came, we had our own mechanism of working. Now they came with their expectations, and we have never been facilitated on what they want. They just say a word and say this is what we must do. We follow in a dark way because we are not sure of what we must do. When they come, they say this is not how we want it, we want qualified teachers, and they said they gave us time [*to get qualified*], but it is our fault we did not go and get it.' (GP2:5)

These feelings stemmed from the political change brought about by the function shift and the eventual requirement for all ECE practitioners to possess a minimum level of qualification. The perceived lack of communication and miscommunications from the provincial education departments around qualifications, structures and other requirements for registration added to their anxiety:

'I was referring to the function shift, the communication is not clear, even now we're not sure what qualification, what qualification do they need, what must we do, where must we go? Because the last time when we were there in X, they said they are no longer accepting NQF level 4 for zero to four years practitioners, they need NQF level 5.' (GP1:3)

'We don't have money to rebuild. They will come and say this structure must go and we have already built. You spend a lot of money, R 50,000. Then you must demolish the structure. Me, I'm tired.' (GP2:4)

They felt that the goal posts kept changing, and this lack of clarity not only frustrated them but also led to them feeling they could not cope any more. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) (RSA 2015:23) recognises that ECD requires parents or caregivers, the government and civil society to jointly assume responsibility to ensure the optimal development of the child. National government is responsible for creating policy, setting targets and communicating these to provincial governments, who should ensure service delivery and in turn make sure that services are coordinated at district level; government should

also contract nongovernmental organisations to provide services and training of the workforce.

Parents have the responsibility of providing an environment conducive to the development of the child, but of course impoverished families often cannot provide adequate nourishment and stimulation and then the role of the ECE providers becomes even more important. The DBE is committed to fulfilling these policy mandates (DBE 2023), but this requires time. Many amendments to existing legislation have to be tabled and approved, and new policies, including human resource development plans and qualification pathways, have to be developed (DBE 2023). However, while there is much activity at national government level, the information filtering down through provincial and district levels seems to vary according across provinces and districts. For example, there was fear that those who had been providing much needed services for years would be shut down because of their failure to comply with the multitude of requirements for registration and inability to afford or to meet entrance requirements for the new qualifications. This was creating stress and left them feeling helpless:

‘... it’s not nice. People are so stressed. Like they are taking us out of our comfort zone because like when you look back, most of the practitioners, they didn’t go to school, they just get into class and teach. But the main problem is that we have to pay for our own studies, yet we don’t get enough salaries.’ (KZN2:7)

Of particular interest to skills planning and development is the responsibility of the government to ensure that ‘the training of early childhood development practitioners should be invested in upgrading their qualifications and developing clear career paths’ (RSA 2015). However, the majority of the current workforce does not have the required qualifications. Only 23% of ECD practitioners have completed more than secondary school level. Furthermore, 41% of practitioners do not have a Grade 12 school leaving certificate (DBE 2022; Statistics South Africa 2021). The requirement to have a recognised qualification is thus causing much fear among practitioners that they will be ‘thrown out’ (FS1:5).

The drive for increased registration of ELPs is a priority of the DBE, yet the unregistered centres feel they are being excluded from training and support to be able to do just that, as provincial government only provides support to those who are already registered:

‘Because they are saying that they do everything that the registered are doing, but it seems like nobody is saying anything to them. They are always saying to them that they will call them, but they never do. Yes, and every year they are submitting what is supposed to be submitted.’ (MP1:8)

The inability to meet the requirements of government for registration, which would enable them to have a small subsidy, is exacerbated by systemic issues, such as endemic unemployment:

‘I must say, really, it’s not an easy task for you to go and register ... Yeah, this unemployment is really affecting some of the creches because the parents cannot afford to pay.’ (KZN1:2)

The stress of daily survival stemming from a lack of finances to pay staff and rent, purchase food and teaching resources was taking its toll on the centre managers and practitioners. This is a constant worry, even for those who do receive the small government subsidy as it is not enough to cover operating expenses (DBE 2022):

‘But this thing has a negative impact on us because even the teachers as much as they love their work, they love their children, but they also need to get paid. And as they are not getting paid, they tend to lose interest. Others they are resigning because they are saying we cannot work for free, I have been in the centre for four months and over four months, but I haven’t been paid, so I can’t go on anymore.’ (KZN1:5)

‘They [*staff*] don’t feel right, because they have expenses to pay. They need to buy clothes at home, their children are dependent on them.’ (MP:1:7)

Staff turnover is high, as practitioners who do have some training look for better opportunities in the public sector

‘I will go to grade R in the government school, its better. I will teach 75 learners but get a full package.’ (NC1:8)

Those who do stay tend to become disengaged, which is one of the major indicators of low levels of workplace well-being (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2021). Many centres have experienced parents removing their children to send them to Grade R (children can now be enrolled in Grade R from 4.5 years) in schools where they do not have to pay. This loss of children further threatens their financial sustainability. There was a strong feeling among practitioners that the ECD centres are better positioned to offer Grade R, as they care for children all day and have better emotional connections with the child and the family.

The situations described earlier cause practitioners to feel undervalued and unheard. The fact that they earn under minimum wage in township and rural centres leads to a low sense of self-worth among practitioners, as they feel their years of experience and dedication do not seem to matter. Feeling valued is a precondition of well-being (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2021). The way the parents treat them also makes them feel disrespected, as one manager revealed:

‘And now, most of the kids that are in their classes, their mothers are very young. They’re very rude and then they don’t respect the teachers. Yeah, they talk as they want with teachers. And then after that they [*parents*] will come to me and report, you know, I was in the class, teacher mang mang mang, and she didn’t even talk to me nicely.’ (NW2:2)

This in turn impacts on their relationships with parents (often conflictful), with other ECE providers in their area (competition over children and resources, rather than collaboration) and with government officials, as they feel they are treated like children when they come to inspect their premises:

‘I teach 3–4 year olds – I am not a child myself!’ (NW1:3)

As one practitioner explained, they feel that they have valuable knowledge to share, but that it is not recognised:

'I'm concerned that the government should have come to us first. Do research on us how we operate, how we work, because it looks like it's clueless on how our field operates. There is no understanding what we do. And they're busy coming in with laws and stuff, changing everything without consulting with us first onto how do we work, how do we operate.' (KZN1:3)

'They are just taking decisions for us, whereas they don't even know if we are happy with those decisions, they don't know how those decisions are affecting us.' (KZN1:2)

'Social workers are not assisting us. I feel that they are bullying us ... What they will tell you when you go there having something that you do not understand "You see. Our work is so much. It's so we are so fully loaded. We don't have time to come and babysit you".' (MP:5)

The feelings of fear, uncertainty, frustration and hurt expressed by the practitioners and managers are not conducive for workplace well-being. Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2021) warn that if people do not feel appreciated, respected and recognised, then they will struggle to find meaning in life and their sense of well-being will be low. The practitioners in this study felt isolated, unsupported and undervalued, and this was impacting negatively on positive feelings, their relationships with each other, parents and centre management and their sense of achievement (Seligman 2018). However, there were some positives that enabled them to keep on working despite the difficult circumstances.

## Theme 2: Factors promoting the well-being of early childhood education personnel

Despite the negative emotions that impacted on several markers of well-being, practitioners displayed a high degree of commitment and care towards the children. Focusing on the needs of the children, rather than their own problems, enabled them to derive satisfaction from their work. They recounted how they make provision first to ensure the children have food:

'We will buy food for the next two months, yes. And then so that if they [*parents or government*] took long to pay, at least you still have something to improvise with.' (MP:9)

They love the children and realise the importance of early care and stimulation, so in theory they supported the function shift:

'So that every child receives a strong foundation, so that they can carry it to their adulthood. I think the government did the best decision on that.' (GP2:6)

They know they are providing an important community service, which gives them a sense of purpose and meaning. They are also aware of the adversities facing children and families and regard ECE as essential to bring about change; therefore they persevere even if they are underpaid and feel undervalued:

'This month the teachers did not get paid because it was holidays and the parents didn't pay school fees. So, I used my own money to buy food and even my daughter she said 'mom next year I am

going to close your crèche because it doesn't function.' And some of the mothers heard her and they said I must not close.' (KZN2:6)

'And my personal opinion is that those centres or places of care that operate from homes, they exist because there is a need, a need that the government is unable to fulfil, the government does not have enough financial and human resources to operate those ECD. So, it's a bit difficult to cut them out just because they do not meet the criteria because they are there standing in the gap of government.' (KZN2:2)

They held aspirations for a brighter future for the ECD sector and were keen to learn how to improve their own situations. For example, one centre manager organised regular sessions for her staff with a counsellor (volunteer), who gave them a platform to talk about anything that was bothering them:

'I know they are doing a lot of job and sometimes they are having their own problems. We even do like a deep breathing session for them.' (NW1:3)

Those centres who were affiliated with a philanthropic or nongovernmental organisation were grateful for the assistance and training they received:

'I didn't even know how to use a laptop, but B would get students from overseas. They would come and sit with me the whole day, teach me how to do income and expenditure, the books and salaries on the laptop.' (NW2:3)

In several areas, they had started to organise themselves into forums as they felt that:

'No one stands for us. No one would say nothing. So now they've already chosen a new committee and then I'm part of that committee, and then we're gonna launch in July, so that everyone must know about this crisis, even us on local level. We are now gonna have a monthly meeting that will show our challenges and then want to plan for future.' (NW1:1)

Practitioners who had been working with the university researchers appreciated what they had learnt and wanted to share it with others:

'... it is our duty to reach out to other centres because we are blessed with the university who support and teach us how to work in our centre.' (NW2:9)

What was also noticeable was that where ECD centres in a particular area had created relationships with other external parties and were sharing information and ideas, they were better informed, better positioned to provide quality education and thus suffered less anxiety and uncertainty. For example, in one province (NC), a few centres had collaborated with feeder primary schools and received learning resources from them because the schools recognised that the children from these centres entered Grade 1 better prepared. These findings indicate that centres who had begun to partner with other centres and community organisations benefitted from this interaction, not only in terms of material benefits but also in terms of their workplace well-being. Instead of being immobilised by negative emotions, these practitioners developed a sense of agency and realised that they did not need to wait until the

government introduced changes and improvements; they could take action in partnership with others to improve their own circumstances. Even if these pockets of collaboration are in the minority at present, creating forums or communities of practice (COP) helps them offer material and emotional support to each other and share knowledge and skills. Developing a more internal locus of control through setting up and participating in such COP will in turn help to improve their job satisfaction and well-being (Padmanabhan 2021), increase engagement and give them a sense of achievement (Seligman 2018).

The discussion to date has enabled us to understand the status of ECE practitioner well-being in township and rural settings, which was our first aim with this article. Based on these findings, we now move onto theorising how they could improve their own well-being, which is our second aim.

### The power of collaborative learning for improving well-being

As some practitioners had already started to collaborate, indicating that they had developed some degree of agency and were keen to find out how to improve their working life, we saw the potential for introducing the concept of AL as a framework for developing the COPs. Zuber-Skerritt (2002) defined AL as:

*'[L]earning from concrete experience, through group discussion, trial and error, discovery and learning from one another. It is a process by which groups of people work on real issues or problems, carrying real responsibility in real conditions.'* (p. 50)

Action learning enables the production of knowledge by those who have to implement it, rather than by researchers or policy makers who then make recommendations to practitioners (West et al. 2019). Learning takes place in groups through supportive questioning and nonjudgemental feedback with an emphasis on critical self-reflection and thorough analysis of personal and contextual factors that hinder or promote goal attainment. Assumptions are challenged, and power dynamics and structural inequalities are made explicit. Although this process might sound complicated for practitioners who have little or no training, the beauty of AL is that it can be done by people with any level of qualifications and literacy (Zuber-Skerritt, Wood & Kearney 2020). By addressing common goals in small groups, practitioners can learn how to challenge and transform oppressive systems and free themselves from self or socially imposed limitations. Because it is experiential, AL helps practitioners integrate theory and practice so that learning is applied. It also encourages broader stakeholder engagement by bringing in multiple voices to generate comprehensive solutions to external challenges (Wood 2020). Thus, AL develops a sense of agency and resilience (Lawrance et al. 2022), mindfulness and self-awareness, all of which contribute to improved well-being (Passfield 2018). To link back to positive psychology, it is evident that AL resonates with the elements of the PERMA model of Seligman (2018) and is

designed to increase people's capabilities (Sen 1993) to choose how to improve their own lives as they see fit.

The findings of this study indicate that practitioners felt that they were not being heard, that their knowledge and experience were not being recognised, that they were not being given enough information and that they were therefore feeling insecure and fearful about their future. We propose that forming COP with other practitioners, and, if possible, external partners such as local training organisations, local DBE and other government and municipality officials and university researchers would enable practitioners to share their local knowledge, experience and insights and participate actively in finding ways to improve their work situations and improve their practice. This study also found evidence that some ECE centres are already taking this step and that in these centres practitioners are coping better with the adversities facing them. Collaboration among practitioners and between practitioners and other stakeholders in ECE holds promise for the improvement of their workplace well-being.

Collaboration based on the principles of AL is widely documented, as a means of helping people to improve their knowledge, skills and attitudes to attain professional, personal and organisational development, improve their feelings of self-efficacy and bring about positive change (Brook 2021; Hinrichsen et al. 2022; Wood 2020). Engagement with others in the field helps to develop supportive relationships and open up new possibilities for personal and professional advancement, which in turn helps to impart meaning and purpose to their work and help them to feel that they matter. Knowing that you are valued promotes health and happiness (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2021). These outcomes would enable practitioners to better navigate adversity and advance the sustainability of their ECE services within resource-constrained environments.

## Conclusion

Our first aim in this article was to understand the current status of ECE practitioners' well-being, as this has been a neglected area of research. We found that changes occurring in the ECE sector in South Africa, related to what is commonly known as the function shift, have had a negative impact on the well-being of practitioners who are generally experiencing uncertainty, confusion and anxiety about their futures. Managers expressed frustration at the administrative hurdles they had to negotiate and the lack of clear communication from provincial education departments. Those practitioners who led ELPs from their homes were especially afraid of closure, as the rezoning process was difficult and very expensive. The reduction of the age for compulsory Grade R has threatened the sustainability of many private ELPs, as they are losing children to the public school system, which cannot at this point cope with the additional influx.

Practitioners also felt that they were undervalued and ignored and that their knowledge and experiences, which

could help government to make useful and relevant decisions, were largely discounted. Assessed against the markers of well-being, as identified by Seligman (2018), Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2021) and Sen (1993), these findings indicate that the well-being of practitioners is indeed under threat. However, adversity breeds resilience (Ungar & Theron 2020), and therefore there is an opportunity for practitioners to do things differently to take more control over their own working lives and increase their well-being.

The realisation of a publicly funded and publicly regulated ECE sector (DBE 2022) is a long-term project, and in the meantime the private sector needs to mobilise itself through collaboration. Support and innovation at the local level are necessary to improve communication channels, provide skills development and enable practitioners to voice their needs and concerns, their ideas and local knowledge. The development of agency, emotional support, sharing of knowledge and resources that such collaboration affords would go a long way to enhancing positive emotions, increasing engagement with their work, strengthening workplace relationships and helping them experience meaning and a sense of achievement. A well practitioner is much better able to make a positive contribution to the holistic development of the child, which is the ultimate goal of all ECE.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

L.W., conceptualised the article, gathered the data, analysed the data and wrote the manuscript, and S.E., assisted in data gathering and analysis and final formatting of article for journal.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, L.W., upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the

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