



New home for early childhood development in the DBE: implications for ECD practitioners?



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Background: Early childhood development (ECD) is pivotal in addressing educational inequality and reducing income disparities in South Africa. Government initiatives to integrate ECD into the education system underscore a positive trajectory.

Aim: This study assesses the impact of relocating ECD to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa on practitioner employment. Specifically, it investigates the challenges ECD practitioners face concerning compliance with DBE norms and standards, including qualifications, professional body registration and adherence to educator conditions outlined by the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC).

Setting: The study is conducted in South Africa, focussing on Gauteng, to examine the ramifications of relocating ECD to the DBE.

Methods: Conducted as a qualitative study, this research examines the potential implications for practitioner employment by conducting interviews with practitioners from both formal and informal settings.

Results: The study indicates that the anticipated policy shift has created uncertainty regarding their employment status among ECD practitioners. This uncertainty may compound sectoral challenges, underscoring the urgent need for government intervention and support.

Conclusion: Addressing the concerns highlighted by this study is imperative before the transition of the ECD sector to a new ministry in South Africa. Additionally, government initiatives to formalise informal ECD centres and broaden access to subsidies are crucial for enhancing sectoral performance.

Contribution: This research sheds light on the challenges confronting ECD practitioners amid policy changes in South Africa, stressing the necessity of government backing in formalising the sector and bolstering subsidy accessibility for improved performance within the South African ECD landscape.

Keywords: early childhood development; policy; practitioners; employment; conditions of employment.

Introduction and background

Early childhood development (ECD) has garnered a lot of interest in the past few years in South Africa and is the focus of much research. Early childhood development forms part of the foundation phase of the South African schooling system, which begins in the reception year known as Grade R until Grade 3, and the other phases are intermediate and senior (Boekhorst & Britz 2004). The focus of this article is on practitioners who serve children in the age range of 4-6 years, that is, the cohort eligible for pre-Grade 1 enrolment in ECD in South Africa. This stems from the government policy that had dropped compulsory schooling by a year before Grade 1, thus introducing reception year expanding access to 5- to 6-year olds, and the proposed drop by a further year extends this to 4-year olds for a pre-Grade R year but some of these children remain outside formal schooling system. Early childhood development was defined by the Department of Education (2001) 'as an umbrella term that applies to the processes by which children from birth to at least 9 years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially'. This encompasses all the needs of a growing child from health and nutrition to education.

Currently, various aspects of ECD are covered by three departments, the Department of Health (DOH), the Department of Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Each has its own definition of what comprises ECD and the age of children catered for.

Administrative responsibility for ECD resides with the DSD, which provides the norms and standards and facilitates registration of ECD centres; however, President Ramaphosa, in his State of the Nation Address (SONA) in 2019, announced plans to migrate the administration of ECD to the DBE (SONA 2019). This announcement follows what is already contained in the National Development Plan (NDP), which states that 'there should be a policy and programme shift to ensure that the Department of Basic Education takes the core responsibility for the provision and monitoring of ECD' (NPC 2011a:302). Other departments such as the DOH and the DSD are, of course, not relegated altogether as role players in this regard but are seen as occupying support roles. This will preserve the notion that education is not prioritised over a holistic approach to child development, as is desired by the government. However, this shift is a major development for ECD as, firstly, it will influence how children are integrated into primary school when they leave ECD, and secondly, ECD will benefit from increased resources through the DBE's budget (DBE 2018a). In his 2023 SONA address, the president made some pronouncements that included the reduction of red tape to make it easier to do business in areas such as the mining rights system, tourism transport operator licences, visas and work permits, early childhood development and the informal sector (SONA 2023). He also made the point that between 2019 and 2022, the number of children who receive ECD subsidies has more than doubled to reach 1.5 million but that 7 million more need to be reached that 'DBE is streamlining the requirements of ECD centres to access support and enable thousands more to receive subsidies from government' (SONA 2023).

Early childhood development has featured in government planning from the beginning of the democratic era. Some of the earlier policy documents developed since 1994 that mention ECD include the White Paper on Education and Training, 1995, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and the National Programme of Action for Children in South Africa, 1996, to mention a few. All assert the rights of children to receive ECD support. The policy process over the years culminated in the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy of 2015 (DSD 2015). Further, the National Development Plan has a section on ECD, which provides some indications as to what the government intends to do with the sub-sector, including recommending two years of compulsory ECD (DSD 2015).

As there is a sizeable number of ECD centres that are unregistered and do not meet the norms and standards outlined in the Guidelines For Early Childhood Development Services developed and published by the DSD (DSD & UNICEF 2006) – which are a prerequisite for registration – many practitioners operating and/or working in these centres are not necessarily qualified or may have minimal qualifications obtained from Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges or accredited non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that provide this service. Early childhood development training has largely been ignored in the South African higher education policy space,

with the Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for ECD only published in 2017 (DHET 2017), thus presenting challenges to access over the years (Visser et al. 2021). There is a need to upgrade ECD practitioners' qualifications in order to address the question of the initial education of these practitioners before employment and to further ensure that the quality of ECD is improved.

The expansion of ECD by the government as espoused by policy, gives opportunities for practitioners to benefit from an increased need for their services. Should the government be looking to recruit practitioners to cater for the potential increase in the numbers of children enrolled in ECDs located in or attached to schools, those practitioners already in the business are the obvious choice although some will remain in ECD centres because of the hybrid model currently in place. This hybrid model sees children between the ages of 4 and 6 split between schools and ECD centres before entering Grade 1. But the fact of the matter is that when the function shift takes place, ECD practitioners might have to abide by the basic norms and standards in place for educators working under the DBE in order for the DBE to maintain a regulated space. Educators' conditions of service and fair treatment are outlined by the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC). In the Policy Handbook for Educators, the ELRC stipulates the norms and standards for educators and the terms and conditions of their employment (Education Labour Relations Council 2003). This raises issues of compliance that have to be enforced and, for those found wanting, getting locked out of the system and potentially losing their livelihoods. Qualifications are important in this case, and this is because fair remuneration is often dependent on qualifications and registration with a professional body to ensure compliance with professional standards (Ramphal & Rajcoomar 2019). These are the issues this study is concerned with.

Early childhood development in South Africa

The Nationwide Audit of Early Childhood Development Provisioning in South Africa, undertaken by the National Department of Education (DOE) alongside the European Union Technical Support Project, contextualised ECD, as a relatively new term in the South African vernacular (Williams et al. 2001:5). This audit contends that 'ECD emerged out of the broader democratic struggle against apartheid with the goal of addressing the lack of a nurturing, educative and supportive environment for the vast majority of South Africa's disenfranchised children (Williams et al. 2001:5). The central goal of ECD provision, therefore, falls within the ambit of 'an ideological and political struggle towards the creation of a society founded on human rights', which ultimately serves children as both individuals and citizens (Williams et al. 2001:5).

According to the audit report, ECD as a concept can be traced back to the years leading up to 1994, when ECD was conceptualised as 'educare' in recognition of:

[T]he ideological belief that the care of young children should involve more than the mere act of keeping watch over children. The concept broadly encompassed the creation of safe, nurturing environments in which children receive care and educational stimuli in a holistic model which caters for all their physical, developmental, emotional and cognitive needs. (Williams et al. 2001:26)

The audit not only expounds on a holistic, integrative South African ECD model, in which the DOE, DOH and DSD all assume varying levels of responsibility for ECD, but it also situates the discursive construction of ECD within an international human rights context. To this end, the sector is studied in this article through the lens of legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child that are binding to South Africa since being ratified.

Early childhood development practitioners in South Africa

The people who take on the responsibility of looking after children and aiding in their development are crucial to the success of ECD. Early childhood development practitioners operate in a very difficult space, characterised by serious challenges such as lack of funding and formal skills. In the current National Qualifications Framework, ECD qualifications are classified as vocational, thus precluding those who have them from belonging to professional bodies such as the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and limiting their earning potential (Harrison 2020). This is important to note because part of delivering decent work as outlined in the NPC (2011b) has to do with providing stable work with decent wages, which is more achievable through formal employment and qualifications that are recognised as professional. Access to decent work provides people in emerging economies with the opportunity to escape poverty and increase their dignity (Ndung'u 2012). As ECD covers a wide spectrum of employment, from informal to formal, it has historically provided employment opportunities for many who could not find employment in the formal economy. The low barriers to entry have also made ECD attractive to many disadvantaged people such as older people and women (Kotzé 2015b). This is not surprising, as women traditionally do much of the unpaid work in the economy, having been relegated to the responsibilities of reproduction and care, including childcare, which is not associated with production or productivity and hence with economic compensation.

The DBE (2018a) recognises that the ECD sector is overwhelmingly occupied by women, putting the figure at 99%. In the DHET's 2020 ECD Sector Skills Plan, the number of female employees stood at an estimated 90950 for registered ECD centres (DHET 2020). Ilifa Labantwana, in

their report titled 'The Plight of the ECD Workforce: An urgent call for relief in the wake of COVID-19' published in 2020 also points out that ECD providers are predominantly African women from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ilifa Labantwana 2020). According to the DBE, in 2018, centres funded by the government catered for about 685000 children, with 240000 or 23% in the pre-Grade R stage (DHET 2020).

From Table 1, it is indeed clear that the majority of ECD practitioners in South Africa are black, and that they cater for the greatest number of black learners. This table gives a visual view of how that is broken down and who the biggest beneficiaries would be in a change in policy. When looking at the table, the breakdown of the learners that black practitioners cater for is 96% black people, 1% coloured people, 0% Indian people and 1% white people. For white practitioners, the breakdown of the learners they cater for is 31% black people, 8% coloured people, 1% Indian people and 51% white people.

The same report by Ilifa Labantwana states that there are more unregistered ECD centres than registered in South Africa, and this is indeed where the challenge comes in (Ilifa Labantwana 2020). Over the years, the government has been increasingly trying to cater for more children in the formal education system. The introduction of Grade R was one such initiative to facilitate the entry of children into the schooling system a year earlier. Currently, the government is aiming to include an even younger cohort of children in a pre-Grade R year of schooling (NPC 2011a). As more and more age cohorts are subsumed into the formal system, as is most likely to happen, ECD practitioners, particularly Black practitioners, stand to lose their clients as parents enrol their children in the formal system that offers free access.

Although Chapter 5, Sections 91–103 of the *Children's Act of 2005* provide guidelines for ECD and stipulate that ECD practitioners must have a National Certificate at the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 1–6, an appropriate ECD qualification or at least a minimum of 3 years' experience working in the field, many practitioners still do not possess any formal qualification. Further education in South Africa is inaccessible to many because of poverty and the cost barriers experienced by many, as evidenced by the student movement of 2015 when university students demanded free education (Mutekwe 2017) and for sectors such as ECD that do not require registration with a professional body to practice, many people would enter those without having to go the route of qualifying first.

TABLE 1: Practitioner race in relation to learners (actual).

Learners	Practitioners race			
	Black people (%)	Coloured people (%)	Indian people (%)	White people (%)
Black people	96	14	63	31
Coloured people	1	72	5	8
Indian people	0	0	20	1
White people	1	6	6	51
Foreign	0	0	0	0
Missing	2	7	7	9
Total	100	100	100	100

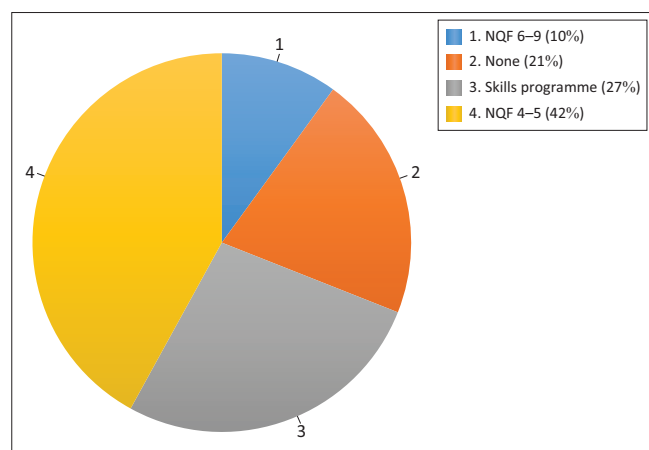
Source: Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2018b, *Human resources development strategy for early childhood development*, DBE, Pretoria

The context of practitioner employment in the early childhood development sector

The South African economy has been experiencing challenges in economic growth in the past decade (Statistics SA 2020), and this has made it difficult to create jobs for its young population. The country had recorded one of the highest unemployment rates among comparable economies prior to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, with Statistics South Africa's 2019 2nd quarter. Quarterly Labour Force Survey putting the rate at 29.0% in the third quarter, a rise of 1.4% from the previous quarter (Statistics South Africa 2019). The numbers released in the third quarter of 2021 put the figure at 34.9%, with the pandemic and resulting lockdowns having an adverse impact on the already weak economy. Currently, as of the first quarter of 2024, the number sits at 32.9% (Statistics South Africa 2024).

The minimum requirement to be employed as a teacher in a South African public school is an NQF level 6 or a 4-year teaching degree. There is a Higher Certificate in Grade R Practices, which is pitched at level 5 (*Children's Act 38 of 2005*). According to a presentation by a Member of Parliament in a 2018 parliamentary session in the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), 'only 33%, that is 8135 of the 24268 Grade R teachers/practitioners, meet the minimum teaching qualifications; and thus, can be employed as fully qualified teachers' (PMG 2016). This presents a major challenge for the remaining 67% of practitioners, especially those who practice in the cohort that will be eligible for entry into a pre-Grade R year of schooling.

In 2021, the DBE commissioned a national census for ECD in the country, and the results provided many insights into the national landscape. Figure 1 provides a picture of the educational status of ECD practitioners (here referred to as 'teaching staff' in the report). Most practitioners (42%) have an NQF level 4 or 5, with only 10% having qualifications above that (DBE 2021). The census report notes that close to half (48%) of ECD practitioners have not received adequate



Source: Department of Basic Education, 2022, *ECD census 2021: Report*, Department of Basic Education, Pretoria

NQF, National qualifications framework.

FIGURE 1: Qualifications of practitioners.

training to the desired level but acknowledged improvement from the 2001 audit (63%) and the 2013 audit (61%) (DBE 2021). This is a worrying state of affairs when about half of the practitioners have not been exposed to systematic training in and knowledge of child growth and development, which would enable them to provide quality ECD services. Manning et al. (2017), in their 2017 meta-analysis of ECD titled 'The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood education and care environment' found that there is a positive correlation between teacher qualifications and quality ECD, noting, however, that this is mainly based on those qualified being lead teachers. The census report does share similar sentiment by stating that 'a higher proportion of staff at registered centres hold NQF qualifications which may be translated to better service quality' (DBE 2021).

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has an ECD teaching qualification equivalent to level 5 on the NQF. As part of the NQF rules, the qualification provides for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for the attainment of the qualification in part or in its entirety. Obtaining a qualification through RPL is an example of one of the innovative methods adopted by the NQF to widen access to the education system. South African Qualifications Authority defines RPL as (SAQA 2016):

[T]he principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed for the purposes of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development. (p. 5)

Under the purpose and rationale of the ECD teaching qualification, SAQA outlines that 'the Higher Certificate is designed to provide access to higher education for many experienced and skilled ECD practitioners and trainers who do not have recognised qualifications' (SAQA n.d.). Furthermore, it is stated that the qualification satisfies two purposes: firstly, to develop ECD practitioners to provide appropriate education, training and development services in the ECD sub-field, and secondly, to enable ECD practitioners to use their knowledge of child growth and development from birth to 9 years and relevant national policies to guide their professional practice in the ECD sub-field (SAQA n.d.).

Moreover, as it stands, ECD practitioners are paid stipends and not salaries (Parliamentary Debates, NCOP 2018). This is especially prevalent for practitioners who cover the 0-4 years cohort and Grade R and are based in centres outside of the public school system, and, as stated earlier in this article, this goes to reinforce the notion that women's work is regarded as being care and reproduction, as opposed to production that results in economic compensation. This practice also extends to some ECD practitioners who teach Grade R in public schools but are not employed as full-time teachers with a full salary that comes with full-time employment benefits. According to the NCOP session quoted earlier, 'the stipends range from R5000 for a level 4 qualification in the Free State to R10 800 for a level 6 and above in the Western Cape' (Parliamentary Debates, NCOP 2018:para 11).

Encouragingly, this practice is slowly being eradicated, with provincial departments bringing these practitioners on board as fully employed workers with full benefits, resulting in improvements in employment status and remuneration for these practitioners (Parliamentary Debates, NCOP 2018). This move is in line with the NDP's goal of decent work and bringing more people into the formal economy where there are rights and legal protections against unfair treatment and remuneration (NPC 2011b).

Research methods and design

The constructivist epistemological paradigm serves as the foundation for this investigation. Specifically, the researchers hoped to acquire information regarding practitioners' perspectives from formal and informal ECD centres impacted by the recent policy change in question. Several authors, including Leedy and Omrod have suggested that qualitative approaches may be utilised to better comprehend any phenomena about which little or no information is currently available (Leedy & Ormrod 2001). For example, according to the findings of this study, nothing is known regarding the repercussions of this policy shift on the existing ECD practitioners.

Sampling

This study used a purposive sampling strategy, in which individuals were selected based on their unique experiences and perspectives in the ECD sector. This was carried out in order to yield trustworthy descriptions, in the sense of being accurate to actual life (Creswell et al. 2013). The participants in the study were early practitioners running ECD centres in Gauteng townships in South Africa. The researchers also used a snowball sampling strategy and purposive selection to attract additional ECD practitioners into the study. The criteria for recruiting more ECD practitioners were the same as those used to enrol the initial cohort of ECD practitioners. As pointed out by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012), the main limitation of this selection approach is the inability to generalise the research findings, especially to all ECD practitioners in South Africa, specifically in the Gauteng province.

The participants

The centres selected were located in six unregistered and four registered day-care centres in the Gauteng province of South Africa ($N = 10$). The researchers chose the centres based on the age groups they served, their location and the ethnic variety of the people who worked there. The centres were in five townships: Tembisa (two), Soweto (two), Soshanguve (two), Capital Park (two) and Gezina (two). The following variables were considered essential for selecting a purposive sample of centres and participants for this study in each township. Firstly, we ensured that the ECD centres we identified as registered were listed in the DSD's database of registered ECD centres. Secondly, to ensure that we captured an accurate representation of a broader practitioner audience, from both well-established and newer centres, half of those we chose had been in operation for at least more than 5 years and the other half for less than 5 years. In addition, practitioners with a level 4 ECD certificate and who are not formally trained were considered for inclusion in the sample. The participants' codes, locations and qualifications are listed in Table 2.

Data collection methods

A descriptive case study approach, complemented by semi-structured interviews, served as the central methodological framework for examining the attitudes of ECD practitioners towards the recent policy change. This approach allows a nuanced exploration of individual perspectives and contextual factors influencing practitioners' responses. Qualitative researchers acknowledge the influence of historical and cultural contexts on human interactions and meaning construction, prompting an immersive engagement with the research context to glean insights directly from participants. By adopting this approach, researchers aimed to capture the complexity of practitioners' experiences and perceptions within the evolving landscape of ECD policy. Creswell (2015) emphasised that such an approach facilitates the generation of rich, contextually grounded understandings that transcend mere data collection, fostering deeper insights into the dynamics shaping practitioners' attitudes and responses to policy shifts. Through semi-structured interviews, researchers engaged directly with practitioners, allowing for the exploration of diverse viewpoints and the identification of key themes and patterns emerging from their narratives. This approach enabled researchers to

TABLE 2: Early childhood development centres and qualifications of practitioners.

Centre	Township	Practitioner code	Unregistered centre	Registered centre	Centre's years in operation	Practitioner's qualification
A	Soweto	APR1	-	✓	Less than 5 years	ECD level 4
B	Tembisa	BPR2	✓	-	Less than 5 years	No formal qualification
C	Soshanguve	CPR3	✓	-	More than 5 years	No formal qualification
D	Soweto	DPR4	✓	-	More than 5 years	No formal qualification
E	Tembisa	EPR5	✓	-	Less than 5 years	No formal qualification
F	Soshanguve	FPR6	-	✓	More than 5 years	ECD level 5
G	Capital Park	GPR7	-	✓	Less than 5 years	ECD level 4
H	Capital Park	HPR8	-	✓	More than 5 years	ECD level 5
I	Gezina	IPR9	-	✓	Less than 5 years	ECD level 5
J	Gezina	JPR10	-	✓	More than 5 years	ECD level 5

ECD, early childhood development.

uncover the nuanced interplay of factors influencing practitioners' perspectives, including their professional backgrounds, experiences and contextual realities within the ECD sector.

Data analysis methods

Thematic analysis was the primary method for analysing the qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews with ECD practitioners. This approach involves systematically identifying and organising themes or patterns within the dataset (Krippendorff 2004). Initially, data-driven codes were generated to capture the diverse perspectives and experiences expressed by the practitioners. For example, codes such as 'uncertainty about policy implications' and 'desire for formal recognition' emerged from the analysis of practitioners' responses. Subsequently, continual comparison was applied to compare and contrast the codes identified across different interviews. This process helped to refine and consolidate the initial set of codes, facilitating the identification of broader themes within the dataset. For instance, through continual comparison, it became evident that many practitioners expressed concerns about their uncertain future under the new policy, indicating a recurring theme of 'uncertainty and apprehension'.

While thematic analysis offers flexibility in identifying patterns within qualitative data, it can sometimes lead to inconsistencies or lack of coherence in theme development (Holloway & Todres 2003). An epistemological position guiding the study's empirical claims was explicitly applied to address this potential limitation. This involved grounding the analysis within a coherent theoretical framework that informed the interpretation of the data. Table 3 presents a summary of codes and their corresponding broader themes identified through thematic analysis.

Limitations

The online and telephonic administration of the tool formed part of the preventive measures for both the researcher and the participants necessitated by the COVID-19 outbreak, and this presented a challenge in terms of triangulating the data, with the researchers being unable to capture the emotions of the interview respondents through observation. Another limitation of the study is that the

investigation was carried out in a single province of South Africa, and therefore, the findings cannot be applied to a broader population.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy – Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg (reference no.: 21PMGPP23). Depending on their geographic location and willingness to participate, the data for this article were obtained from five townships in the Gauteng province. The University of Johannesburg's ethics committee granted permission for the study. A permit to conduct the study was also obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education. Before any data were collected, we received informed consent from the centre managers and practitioners. A brief explanation of the semi-structured interviews was provided to them before they consented to participate in the study. After submitting an expression of interest, a letter of information and a permission form was issued to each instructor who expressed an interest in participating in the study.

Findings and discussion

The president's announcement in SONA 2019 that ECD would move to the DBE gave impetus to debates in parliament as to what would happen to the various stakeholders involved. This study focussed particularly on what would happen to practitioners catering for the cohort of children between the ages of 4 to 6 years and their employment prospects as administration of the sub-sector is shifted from one ministry to another. The presence of practitioners with no or low-level qualifications brings into question their recognition as professionals who are eligible to continue teaching by being absorbed into the DBE as full-time employees.

Implications of the policy changes for early childhood development practitioners' employment

The implications of recent policy changes regarding ECD practitioners' employment have garnered attention in parliament, reflecting recognition of these practitioners' vital

TABLE 3: Summary of coded themes emerging from thematic analysis.

Practitioners code	Interview question	Codes	Description	Theme
BPR3	What are your thoughts on the recent policy change?	Uncertainty about policy implications	Expresses uncertainty about how the policy change will affect them	Uncertainty and apprehension
DPR4	How do you feel about the policy shift to the DBE?	Desire for formal recognition	Desires formal recognition and acknowledgement of their role as professionals	Professional recognition
FPR6	What kind of support do you feel you receive from the government?	Lack of government support	Expresses dissatisfaction with the lack of support and recognition from the government	Government support
GPR7	Do you think the policy shift will benefit you?	Perception of policy as beneficial	Views the policy shift as beneficial for their professional status and prospects	Positive outlook
HPR8	How has the Department of Social Development been in terms of support?	Recognition of the importance of ECD	Acknowledges the importance of ECD and hopes for greater recognition and support from the government	Importance of ECD
JPR10	What are your concerns about the policy shift?	Concerns about training and qualifications	Expresses concerns about the need for adequate training and qualifications under the new policy	Training and qualifications

ECD, early childhood development; DBE, department of basic education.

role in educating the nation's children (Du Plessis 2021). Given the predominantly female composition of the ECD sector and its historical marginalisation within the economy, investments in ECD and its practitioners hold the potential for empowering women and formalising employment, particularly in unregistered ECD centres. While some practitioners welcomed the policy shift, others expressed dissatisfaction and uncertainty regarding its implications, especially concerning job absorption, training and the fate of older practitioners. Concerns about the lack of consultation with practitioners were raised, exacerbating uncertainty about future employment prospects, particularly in unregistered centres. Despite concerns, some practitioners expressed optimism, citing perceived benefits such as consistent income, health benefits and improved communication under the DBE.

Despite mixed reactions, many ECD practitioners expressed discontent with the policy shift, fearing negative impacts on the sector and children's lives (CPR3). Criticism was directed at the DBE's perceived shortcomings in fulfilling its responsibilities, leading some practitioners to doubt the efficacy of transferring ECD to its jurisdiction. However, others, including those managing both registered and unregistered ECD centres, welcomed the policy change, citing challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and hopes that the transition would address these issues (DPR4) (JPR10). The informal nature of the ECD sector, highlighted in reports (Ashley-Cooper, Atmore & Van Niekerk 2012), underscores the urgency for government support in successfully migrating ECD to the DBE, particularly given the sector's significant representation of women in the informal economy. Ultimately, the debate over policy implications reflects broader concerns about gender equality, economic empowerment and the welfare of children in South Africa's ECD sector, underscoring the need for careful consideration and stakeholder engagement in policy decisions affecting practitioners and young learners alike.

Implications of the policy for early childhood development practitioners who are qualified vs not qualified

The need for urgent attention and resources to address the challenge posed by unqualified or underqualified ECD practitioners is evident. As highlighted by Ashley-Cooper et al. (2012), calls for a robust ECD practitioners' education programme underscore the necessity for training initiatives to construct an ECD knowledge base and attract individuals from diverse backgrounds to the sector. While some practitioners lack formal qualifications, their uncertainty about their place within the formal education sector raises concerns about the policy's potential negative impacts, as expressed by respondents such as BPR3 and DPR4. However, those holding formal qualifications, ranging from ECD level 4 to 5, anticipate being taken more seriously as professionals under the DBE, echoing sentiments shared by GPR7 and HPR8. The debate underscores the importance of consultation with stakeholders to consider diverse perspectives and foster

solutions, aligning with Lloyd and Hallet's (2010) argument for formalisation to clarify ECD practitioners' roles.

The gap between policy and practice concerning the training of ECD practitioners, as emphasised by DHET (2020), requires meaningful operationalisation and implementation to benefit the intended recipients. Recognition of Prior Learning emerges as a valuable mechanism for professionalising experienced practitioners lacking formal qualifications, an aspect not extensively discussed in parliamentary debates but crucial for maintaining skilled personnel in the system amid the migration to the DBE. Financial investment, as advocated by Fenech, Sumsion and Shepherd (2010), and recognition of the ECD workforce as professionals, per Vandebroek, Urban, and Peeters (2016), are deemed essential for achieving quality ECD services. However, six out of 10 practitioners interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the government's insufficient support and recognition of their self-taught skills and experience, echoing sentiments shared by BPR2, FPR6 and others. The desire for formal recognition and certification of acquired skills underscores practitioners' need for acknowledgement and support from the government, reflecting broader aspirations for professional growth and validation within the ECD sector.

Lack of clarity as to how many practitioners the government plans on hiring

A clearer articulation by the government as to the projected number of practitioners that will be needed in the system would go a long way in giving direction to planning in the ECD sector. It is still early in the process of the function shift, and ECD is still under DSD, but an indication of projected numbers could help illuminate the budget that might be required to make this shift a success. That being said, the process of migration is still estimated to take about 2 years, possibly more, and some of the issues raised may be resolved in due course (Du Plessis 2021).¹ The emergence of COVID-19 has made it difficult for the normal conducting of business in both the public and private spheres, and this might delay any plans put in place by any sector or department. So some delay in the implementation of the new ECD policy might be something to be expected.

However, some of the practitioners raised concerns regarding the function shift. The majority (six) out of (four) of our respondents reported that they would like to become part of the DBE and be registered as government employees; however, there is no clear direction as to what is required from the ECD practitioners for this to happen:

'I am of the view that the President has made this declaration without being fully informed about the developments in the ECD sector; how would they absorb all of us? Does DBE have the capacity to absorb all of us? A clear direction on this would help.' (EPR5)

1. Du Plessis (note 56 above).

Difficulties with the eligibility criteria to formalise the informal early childhood development centres

Another critical argument, in line with the approach proposed by the Real Reform for ECD movement, is for the state to consider lowering the eligibility criteria for ECD practitioners in order to formalise the informal ECD centres and expand access to state subsidies. Importantly, the Real Reform for ECD movement is committed to providing all children with comprehensive, adequately funded, inclusive and high-quality ECD services. Therefore, the movement urges that ECD centres and practitioners who do not meet the registration requirements be granted conditional registration. They further call on provincial Members of the Executive Councils (MECs) to support ECD practitioners and providers servicing poor communities to meet registration requirements. In addition, MECs must be required to report to the Minister of Basic Education on the progress achieved. These proposals should be taken into consideration when implementing the new policy given that it is not yet clear as to what will happen to the thousands of unregistered and unqualified ECD practitioners when the sector is formalised.

The findings of the interviews are in line with the Real Reform movement's proposal. The interviews revealed that the four unregistered centres desire to operate their centres in accordance with the law, but the DSD registration requirements are difficult for the centres to meet. As a result, some centres operate without being officially registered, putting children's health and safety at risk. This finding is indicative of a lack of willingness on the part of the DSD to streamline the registration process for ECD providers.

The four ECD practitioners had the following to say:

'I want to operate legally and be registered under the government, but I can't meet their registration requirements. Government should at least provide us with support or financial support to meet their registration requirements. With ECD moving to DBE, I'm not confident whether this will change or become stricter.' (CPR3)

'My view is that the procedures behind the ECD sector are unnecessarily difficult and prohibitive resulting us being unable to register our centres. This affect us negatively given that we operate from poor communities.' (EPR5)

'I don't think that even though the ECD sector will be moved to the DBE ministry, government will be able to hire all of us. ECD centres will continue to operate. The least government it could do is make their registration processes simpler for us to operate lawfully.' (BPR2)

'My wish is to become a registered ECD practitioner and be entitled for government benefits, unfortunately the centre where I work is not formally registered. The owner tried several times to register it but the registration processes are overcomplicated.' (DPR4)

Conclusion

There is no denying that ECD has been identified as an important tool in trying to reduce the inequality that exists in

the country in terms of access to quality education and, later on in life, income disparities. That the government is taking steps to make ECD an important part of the education system and to allocate more resources to the sector bodes well.

The fact that many ECD practitioners operate in the informal sector has resulted in their voices not being heard much within the system. That these practitioners are overwhelmingly women may have exacerbated their plight. While policies relating to practitioners do exist, improvements in the policy on minimum requirements for practitioners could go a long way in making it more realistic and easier for practitioners to be registered. Members of Parliament have been raising the issues that affect these workers and holding the government accountable, which is an encouraging sign for the future of ECD practitioners.

Furthermore, the findings from this study support the view that the new policy, which is yet to be implemented, is already causing uncertainties among ECD practitioners regarding their employment. This could result in new challenges for the ECD sector, in addition to those it already faces, as outlined in this article. These challenges need to be addressed immediately before the sector is transferred to another ministry. More importantly, the findings also suggest that the government must provide more assistance in formalising informal ECD centres and expanding access to state subsidies to improve the sector's performance.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of our study.

Recommendations for government

Involvement in the consultation process: Early childhood development practitioners should be involved in the consultation process of policy formulation that affects ECD. Given the mixed reactions and concerns about the lack of consultation expressed by the practitioners, it is crucial to ensure that those affected by policy changes have a louder say. This will help address the uncertainties and provide a platform for diverse perspectives.

Clear implementation plans: It is necessary to have clear plans for implementation, monitoring and evaluation when adding ECD to the DBE's portfolio to ensure systems of accountability and transparency. This addresses the practitioners' concerns about job absorption and training requirements, ensuring a smooth transition.

Opportunities for recognition of prior learning and higher education: The government should create opportunities for experienced ECD practitioners to attain degree credentials through RPL and should award them subsidies to enrol in higher learning institutions. This addresses the need for professional growth and formal recognition expressed by practitioners with extensive experience but no formal qualifications.

Urgent implementation of minimum requirements policy:

The 'Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for ECD Educators' should be implemented urgently to further expand the opportunities for ECD practitioners and provide upward mobility pathways. This ensures a robust ECD education programme that practitioners feel is necessary for the sector's improvement.

Support for women's economic empowerment: The government should make the new ECD policy a vehicle for bringing women into the mainstream economy by providing sustained support for and investment in the development of ECD practitioners. Given the sector's significant representation of women, this aligns with the broader concerns about gender equality and economic empowerment.

Recommendations for early childhood development practitioners

Affiliation with collective bargaining councils: Early childhood development practitioners should affiliate themselves with collective bargaining councils to ensure that their voices are heard. This collective approach can amplify their concerns and contribute to more effective policy advocacy.

Leveraging government opportunities: Early childhood development practitioners should leverage some of the opportunities offered by the government to further their studies and develop their careers. Utilising available resources can help address the gaps in formal qualifications and professional development.

Support for advocacy campaigns: Early childhood development practitioners should support those campaigns that represent their needs. Engaging with advocacy efforts can help push for the necessary reforms and support systems that benefit the ECD sector.

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Authors' contributions

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