

## An Investigation into Practical Interventions for Quality Early Childhood Development: The Siyakhulisa Project

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**ABSTRACT** Investments in Early Childhood Development (ECD) are one of the most effective ways in which to decrease social inequalities caused by adverse environments as such environments hamper the development of young children. These interventions could increase school attendance numbers and could increase the pass rates in primary and secondary schools. Formal education age is too late for a child to start education as the early ages form the basis of development and learning in later years. Consequently, there is a need to focus on early childhood care and development. This article presents a descriptive study of an Early Childhood Development intervention project that resulted in a wide range of learning and development opportunities for children in townships in the Vaal Triangle in South Africa. ECD practitioners and lecturers from the North-West University (NWU), Vaal Triangle Campus planned the intervention programme together. The outcomes of this intervention project were achieved. The components of the intervention programme were implemented as intended and what was delivered went according to the way in which it was planned. Reflection from ECD practitioners and lecturers indicates that this project has started to address the learning needs of practitioners and as a result, learners in these townships.

### INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Development is defined as any programme, activities or experiences aimed at promoting the overall health and education of children under the age of nine years (Preston et al. 2012). Learning starts at birth and all aspects of a child's development are directly dependent upon the child being immersed within a healthy, nurturing environment from early days of life. Early childhood experiences have a decisive impact on the architecture of the brain. In stimulating environments, children are more likely to display positive personal, social and intellectual traits including self-confidence, mental health, motivation towards learning, an ability to solve conflict and to develop and sustain friendships (Steyn et al. 2011). Quality early childhood education is especially advantageous for children from low socio-economic or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (Butler-Adam 2013).

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The South African Minister of Basic Education, Motshekga (2011), posits that "...teachers are the main pillars of a sound and progressive society as they are the ones who pass on knowledge, skills and values to learners. The South African Deputy president Motlanthe (2011), argues that well-trained and motivated teachers are essential in delivering quality education and that one of government's roles is to facilitate teacher training and to support teachers on an ongoing basis. However, the standard of education for most learners in disadvantaged areas is still of poor quality. "It is a tragedy that good educational opportunities are not available to every boy and girl" (Masondo 2012). Although some government interventions might assist in ensuring quality early learning programmes, governmental leaders also have to accept that realities, such as the ECD situation in South African townships, necessitate special attention (Blank 2011; Preston et al. 2012). Education is not free and equal yet for all South African learners. It is thus imperative to deal with the real problems before it can be expected that anything would change as far as education in South Africa goes (Bannatyne 2012).

It is argued that the principles of professional development emanate from foundational applied behaviour and analytical principles related to teaching and learning, from adult learning theory, from models for improving performance, from models in elementary and secondary education, from initial preparation practices and practices associated with ongoing education or learning experiences designed to support, improve or change practice (Catania 2006; Snyder et al. 2011). The majority of South African Early Childhood Development practitioners have not been exposed to any form of training.

General education and adult learning literature suggest that personnel preparation reform efforts need to incorporate underlying assumptions about individual and systemic change. These assumptions include comprehensive and long-term approaches, practitioners that recognize the gap between their current and desired knowledge and skills and practitioner participation in the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions (De Clercq and Phiri 2013). Professional development should be characterized by facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of knowledge in practice (Snyder et al. 2011; Moyo and Ndlovu 2012). Any conceptual framework for such development should include the 'who' (learner), the 'what' (content) and the 'how' (facilitation).

The emphasis on the 'who' is a reminder that ECD practitioners vary widely with respect to their qualifications, experience, race and culture and that they serve children who are themselves diverse in many aspects. The 'what' defines the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will be the focus of the professional development programme. It is important to have a deep understanding of the principles of teaching and learning and of what a practice looks like in applied settings. It is essential to be clear about the purpose of the practice, to understand which guidelines and standards relate to such practice and to know what evidence exists to show that it is effective (Moyo and Ndlovu 2012).

The 'how' helps to identify the professional development approaches. Professional development is more likely to enhance teaching and learning when it is characterized by the following elements:

- ♦ Consists of content specific rather than general instruction.

- ♦ Is aligned with instructional goals, learning outcomes and materials that practitioners use in their practice.
- ♦ Learning opportunities are intensive, are sustained over time and include guidance and feedback on how to apply specific practices through methods such as coaching, consultation or facilitation (Buysse et al. 2009).

Since any intervention programme should be aligned with the desired outcomes and should be structured in a manner that would lead to implementation in practice, it is essential to identify clear objectives, to present theory about knowledge and skills to be acquired or mastered, to demonstrate and model, to create opportunities to practice skills in real contexts, to give feedback about the implementation, to follow-up in order to support implementation and to help to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context (Snyder et al. 2011; Butler-Adam 2013).

This article focuses on an ECD intervention project initiated by the NWU, Vaal Triangle Campus that impacted positively on the quality of teaching and learning in ECD centers in townships in the Vaal Triangle. In these contexts, ECD centers are opened and managed by people (ECD practitioners) who have never had formal teacher training. They open ECD centers due to their love for children, because of recognizing a need in the community and as a result of their desperation for an income. In the context of this research, specification of competencies was important for establishing the identity, knowledge and skills of the ECD practitioners and for describing what these practitioners should know and be able to do. Participation of the ECD practitioners in the design of the intervention programme was essential. It was also important to implement the components of the programme as was intended and to provide systematic support and follow-up in order to assist the ECD practitioners in the implementation of knowledge and skills acquired during the training sessions.

### Community Participation in Development

Current academic discourse about intervention programmes is moving in two directions. There is an increasing recognition of the validity of local ways of knowing and doing, but also a greater value placed on diversity (Cleghorn

and Prochner 2003). This is especially true for developing countries. However, it seems that despite the best efforts to recognize local cultures as valuable resources for planning appropriate intervention programmes, most intervention programmes take their cues from imported models that reinforce value shifts towards the individualistic, production oriented cultures of the west. According to Botes and Van Rensburg (2000) the majority of development projects are initiated by outsiders. They are rarely founded spontaneously by the community itself. In this regard Botes and Van Rensburg (2000) refer to Africa as a graveyard of development projects due to failures resulting from externally induced development and externally managed processes.

Developers often think that they know best and therefore their prime function is to transfer knowledge to communities whom, by definition, know less. Professionals often regard themselves as the sole owners of development wisdom and as having the monopoly of solutions which consistently underrate and under-value the capacities of local people to make their own decisions as well as to determine their own priorities. It seems difficult for developers to view community needs and opportunities through the eyes of the end-beneficiaries (Dudley 1993 in Botes and Van Rensburg 2000). Therefore, participation often starts after projects have already been designed and community participation in such cases is nothing more than attempts to convince beneficiaries of what is best for them.

According to Jaftha (2013) over eagerness often lead to academics, students and communities falling into several gaps, including the notion that the university has all the knowledge, the notion that the university must develop the community (raise them up to where we are) and the notion that academics assume that they do not know much. Community engagement is a human issue, an interface between human groupings. In this regard Jaftha (2013) advises as follows: 'Never let your 'sorrow' for a community become the driving force for your decision to become involved in community engagement. Be honest with yourself and your partner community.'

There is always tension between the imperatives of delivery (product) and community participation (process). Pressure for immediate results often undermines attention to institution

building (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000). In many development projects the hard issues (technology, finances, physical and material issues) are perceived as being more important than the soft issues (community involvement, decision making processes, building capacity). This view might destroy the most noble development initiatives. The reason could well be that the community is only used as a means to achieve developers' or researchers' goals. Any pressure to deliver results can force development workers or researchers to take matters out of the hands of the community and to complete everything themselves. Achieving anticipated results in too short a time have caused many unsuccessful development efforts.

Community involvement requires a sound understanding of the problems and challenges currently facing such communities (Van Schalkwyk 2013). Due to the complexity of communities, guidelines for participatory development can never be seen as blueprints, but rather as frameworks of values, principles and approaches to promote the ideals of participatory development. Participatory developers should:

- ♦ Demonstrate awareness of their status as outsiders.
- ♦ Respect the community's contribution in terms of their skills, knowledge and potential.
- ♦ Promote co-decision making in defining needs, goals and plans.
- ♦ Guard against the domination of a specific interest group.
- ♦ Acknowledge that soft issues are important (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000).

Developing professionals as well as researchers should thus adopt the motto of planning 'with' and not 'for' the people (Butler-Adam 2013). This should lead to a change from being an implementing agent to being a facilitator and a mentor.

Limited empirical research exists to guide researchers and developers in terms of the needed knowledge and instructional strategies that can lead to improved ECD programme outcomes. Research conducted by Snyder et al. (2011) indicates that most studies on ECD interventions focus on in-service training and staff development. However, out of 256 studies, only 159 reported that some form of follow-up support was provided after the interventions, only 59% reported the nature of the follow-up and 66% re-

ported the frequency of support in implementation. None of these studies reported whether the intervention components were implemented as intended. Although Botes and Van Rensburg (2000) emphasise the importance of community contribution and participation in the design of intervention programmes, insufficient literature exists in this regard.

There is a need to advance the scientific basis for ECD intervention programmes, but even more so, for the measurement of the success of implementation efforts. There is also a need to share what works for whom, under what circumstances and whether what was delivered went according to the way in which it was planned. This article discusses an ECD intervention project initiated by the North West University, Vaal Triangle Campus that impacted positively on the quality of teaching and learning environments in township ECD centers in the Vaal Triangle of the Gauteng Province, South Africa.

### **Aim of the Intervention Project**

The intervention project aimed to empower ECD practitioners with knowledge and skills that might offer them the opportunity to earn a living, but more importantly, to care, teach and develop society's most vulnerable members, namely young children. The aim of the project was translated into the following research objectives:

- ♦ To implement an intervention project aimed at empowering ECD practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to teach Grade R (the year before formal education) learners.
- ♦ To determine if the ECD practitioners gained knowledge and skills to teach Grade R learners.
- ♦ To determine if the knowledge and skills gained during the intervention programme were implemented at the ECD centers.

### **Description of the Intervention Project**

In 2011 the researchers engaged in a 10 month community-based research project. The project was conceived after reading and reflecting on the empirical and theoretical contexts of: Early Childhood Development, intervention programme, early childhood practitioners, community-based research, teaching and learning environments, Grade R teaching and learning programmes and mentoring.

The practitioners who participated in this project had no formal training for teaching Grade R learners and they performed their daily work with minimum resources (Letseka 2013). They had some practical experience in the ECD field. The practitioners agreed that they needed to gain knowledge and skills to teach Grade R learners more effectively. They voiced a serious need to improve the teaching and learning environments at their respective ECD centers. Together, these practitioners were responsible for the Early Childhood Development of about 450 learners.

The researchers had in-depth knowledge of ECD theories, teaching and learning strategies, as well as the application of theory in practice. The practitioners participated in determining the contents of the intervention programme.

Classes were presented on Saturdays, twice monthly. All classes involved theory and practical application. The practitioners were expected to implement what they had learnt after every class.

The researchers visited the ECD centers on a regular basis to assess whether implementation was effective and to support and assist the practitioners with challenges that they experienced. All practitioners were assured of continuing assistance and support from the researchers after the completion of the intervention programme. To provide sustained follow-up support, the researchers visit the ECD centers twice a year.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research followed a community-based research approach. The interaction between theories, action, lived experience and critical reflection represents a cycle of learning embedded in the community-based-research process (Slamat 2013). Community-based research enhances the practical experience of the students and teachers, in the context of this research, ECD practitioners and researchers. Similar to teaching, research is a core university business (Berman 2011). Applied research is a form of engaged scholarship. Community-based research has its roots in applied research and is outcome-directed with benefits to communities (Slamat 2013; Winter et al. 2006). Research that focuses on specific community issues or that provides a point of university access for community mem-

bers, is a structural and functional indicator of an engagement agenda within universities. For most universities it is presently a newer form of scholarship. According to Hollander (2009), the manner in which the researcher asks questions, grounds the study in the literature and the higher standards held in employing the very same tools than practitioners may use, make such work scholarship and sets it apart from the world of practice.

A qualitative research design was used for this research. According to Creswell (2009) and Minichiello and Kottler (2010) qualitative research developed in social and human sciences as a reaction to the view that human beings can be studied in the same way than objects. Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as multi-method focused, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. A qualitative research design was suitable for this research as it takes into account the context and the participants' categories of meaning. It further allows for examining complex issues, is dynamic and researchers can generate explanatory theory about a phenomenon.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the participants five months after the training started, as well as, at the end of the intervention project. The interviews were conducted to determine if the practitioners acquired the knowledge and skills needed to teach Grade R learners and if they were experiencing any challenges in implementing the knowledge and skills that they have acquired during the training.

A set of predetermined open-ended questions on an interview schedule was developed to guide the researchers during the interviews. Participants were guided and encouraged to share their experiences and views (Maree 2010).

Through conducting face-to-face interviews with all individual participants, the researchers established a relationship with the ECD practitioners and also gained their co-operation and confidence. The interviews were audio-taped and handwritten notes were used to support the recordings. This assisted in the transcriptions for the purpose of data analysis (Maree 2010).

### **Data Analysis**

The intervention programme broadened the knowledge of all participants. A partnership was created between the community and the researchers. All the participants benefited from this engagement. Researchers and practitioners were committed to see improvement in the well-being of Grade R learners. According to Snyder et al. (2011) an intervention programme should be aligned with the desired outcomes and should be structured in a manner that would facilitate implementation in a practical context. The knowledge and skills that the ECD practitioners gained were implemented in their respective ECD centers.

Data collected was analyzed and the following themes emerged:

### ***Empowerment of ECD Practitioners***

Most of the ECD centers in townships in the Vaal Triangle are opened and managed by individuals who are unemployed, love children and want to provide for a need voiced by the community. They have little- or no knowledge and some experience of teaching Grade R learners towards school readiness. In this regard Blank (2011) also indicates that many early childhood practitioners have no formal training for educating and developing the young child. Therefore, requiring a formal qualification from these practitioners might result in marginalizing them because they do not meet the necessary requirements to acquire such qualifications. This intervention programme bridged the gap!

In community engagement a two-way engagement, whereby knowledge, skills, expertise and resources required to develop and sustain a developing society is availed should be the aim (Alexander et al. 2010; Butler-Adam 2013). For this reason, the participants in this research were fully involved in determining the contents of the intervention programme. They experienced the training programme as 'our' programme and not the 'researchers' assumptions of bringing solutions to problems they 'do not know' and 'have never experienced'. Supporting quotes include:

Mrs Tesha indicated that:

*'This programme broadened my mind; I had little knowledge about pre-school, now I am getting more and more experience in running*

*the ECD centre. I also put my part to the programme'.*

Miss Ezeo said:

*'I believe that when I go back, I will be able to tell my teachers how to run the school. I told the ladies that I struggle with this and they listened and helped me'.*

Mrs. Zulu indicated that:

*'Yes, where I was trained we were taught how to open a centre and the cleanliness. It was more about management and this one is more about teaching the children'.*

Mrs Khumalo said:

*'I liked how we learn. We know something and they add to that'.*

The above data confirms the arguments of Marais et al. (2011), Wenger et al. (2002), Tok (2011) and Butler-Adam (2013) namely that quality ECD interventions can result in significant benefits in terms of school-readiness and achievement. The data shows improvement in the knowledge and skills of the practitioners. This is a positive outcome given the shortage of well-trained ECD teachers and the lack of training opportunities available in South African townships (Steyn et al. 2011).

As part of its ongoing efforts to improve the foundation phase of education in South Africa, the Department of Education is intensifying its efforts to raise awareness of and increase access to ECD services. Although these services play a vital role in the development of children by placing them in an educational environment that helps to shape their social, cognitive and emotional skills, all children do not have access to such formal services. In this regard ECD practitioners have a role to play.

The majority of the participants in this research indicated that they have gained knowledge and skills and were empowered to present the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of Grade R learners. The data supports the findings of Snyder et al. (2011) that revealed the positive impact of intervention programmes on the empowerment of teachers. As argued by Snyder et al. (2011) the knowledge and skills that these practitioners gained should enable them to fill the demands of the workforce. 2011).

### ***Implementation of Knowledge Gained***

The implementation of knowledge gained in any workshop or course is always a challenge.

However, literature suggests that where knowledge and learning are well defined and understood, the related knowledge and learning activities are more effective and more likely to have a positive impact in practice. Participation in knowledge and learning activities and systematic approaches to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these activities, are of crucial importance (Ramalingham 2005).

By stating that ".....when everything that is learnt stays theoretical, it will not be useful in the future...", Tok (2011) posits that training experiences that lead to practical implementation are more effective than those focusing on theoretical knowledge only. During this intervention programme implementation had to be done immediately after each class. ECD practitioners had to give feedback on the implementation in the next class. The researchers visited the centers and witnessed how the practitioners implemented the knowledge and skills that they had acquired in their Grade R classrooms. The visits also provided an opportunity for mentorship.

According to Rowley (1999), a good mentor is highly committed to the task of helping teachers find success and gratification in their work. Such commitment flows naturally from a resolute belief that mentors are capable of making a significant and positive impact on the life of another. The absence of mentors to support teachers (in the context of this research, ECD practitioners) would impact negatively on the implementation of gained knowledge and skills and as a result, on the development of learners (Butler-Adam 2013). The researchers therefore assisted and supported the ECD practitioners during their visits to the ECD centers.

As suggested by Snyder et al. (2011) and Butler-Adam (2013) this intervention programme was aligned with the desired outcomes and structured in a manner that could lead to implementation in practice. Clear objectives were identified, theory about knowledge and skills to be acquired or mastered was presented, demonstrated and modelled. Opportunities to practice skills in real contexts, to give feedback about the implementation, to follow-up in order to support implementation and to help to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context were created.

During feedback sessions the following was stated by the ECD practitioners:

Mrs Lolo said:

*'I tell the teachers what they are supposed to do in my school'.*

She added:

*'I demonstrate what we have learnt so that they know exactly what to do, from now onwards, we will not be wondering what to do with our school children'.*

Mrs Sylufia stated:

*'We have been told what to do, we have no excuse and it is everything we need to know to make our centers into a place that can make the GR R School ready'.*

Mrs Khumalo said:

*'When I go the Monday I do everything that I learn and I teach the other teachers at my center'.*

During a visit to the ECD centers Miss Kuku showed the following:

*'I want to do everything I have learned in my pre-school: the weather chart is there, the robots are there, alphabet, numbers 1-10 are on the wall now, the children can now visualise what they are learning'.*

According to Snyder et al. (2011) professional development should be facilitated through teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of knowledge in practice. The ECD practitioners gained knowledge and skills and the researchers observed that the knowledge and skills did not stay theoretical but that it was implemented immediately and also cascaded to the other practitioners in the respective ECD centers.

### **Strategies for Teaching Grade R Learners**

The intervention programme aimed to empower ECD practitioners with the strategies needed to teach Grade R learners. The programme included strategies for teaching each topic in the Grade R curriculum in all three Learning Areas, namely: Numeracy, Literacy and Life Skills.

The ECD practitioners commented as follows:

Miss Njapha stated:

*'When you teach, you are including everything. You are including Literacy, Numeracy, everything. You use different methods to make all learners understand. I was just telling them things and not involving them, but I have learnt*

*to involve them. Now I am confidently and seriously teaching them, I used the methods you taught us, it is working, all the children are happy'.*

Miss Zulu reported:

*'This workshop really helped me; you know the story of Adam and Eve? I used to teach them that story without showing them pictures, so now when I show them pictures they understand it more'.*

Mrs Phiri said:

*'You have taught us practical ways of teaching Grade R for school readiness'.*

She added:

*'To be honest, everything in the programme is now easy to follow, I can say that I am honoured to be part of this workshop, I am equipped to teach for school readiness'.*

Mrs Ngwenya stated:

*'I never thought that I will be able to play like that with children, I was think that I can't, but the atmosphere here was so good that I tried and succeeded'.*

Mrs Losa added that:

*'I thought that people were going to laugh at me if I made a mistake, but the exercises were so good that I got fully involved, I am glad I can play again. The children in the centre will have a lot of fun; they will be looking forward to coming back just so that they can do these activities'.*

The development needs and challenges of poor and marginalized people played a crucial role during this engagement between the university and the community (Alexander et al. 2010; De Clercq and Phiri 2013). Through their participation, the ECD practitioners gave a realistic picture of the reality on the ground (Moyo and Ndlovu 2012). The fact that they participated in the design of the intervention programme resulted in a perception that the programme belonged to all of us. The researchers are of the opinion that this contributed to their success in the implementation of strategies to teach Grade R learners. Considering the above quotes, it is evident that the ECD practitioners were empowered with knowledge, skills and strategies for teaching the Grade R curriculum.

The data is consistent with the literature by Kartal (2007), Steyn et al. (2011) and (Gradin 2013) who posit that in a country with high levels of poverty, early childhood education can play a significant role in getting children school-ready.

### Reflective Approaches

Every class started with a reflection session. The challenges experienced in the implementation of knowledge and skills gained were highlighted and the researchers and practitioners collectively found ways of addressing those challenges. Since all participants were from similar contexts, it was easier to find solutions, because in the group sessions, there was always somebody who had overcome a particular difficulty in that context. Supporting quotes include the following:

Mrs Tembo stated:

*'This programme is very caring, because you people can listen to our challenges every step of the way, and help us rectify them'.*

Mrs Thula said:

*'This shows that you are aware that some of us might not get it right the first time, that is why you spend time inquiring the challenges before, during and after the implementation of the task, thank you very much'.*

Mr Chuchu stated:

*'The reflective sessions make us learn from each other's mistake, it is also highlighting the pitfalls, therefore, we are now aware of all sides of every story, now we know why we have to do this and that'.*

The participants became aware of the importance and the benefits of the reflection sessions. Much as it was important, it was also the most delicate part of the classes, therefore the atmosphere had to be of such nature that the ECD practitioners could expose their failures and challenges. The data confirms the findings of Snyder et al. (2011), namely that feedback about implementation, follow-up in order to support implementation and help to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context play a vital role in the professional training of teachers.

### DISCUSSION

Teachers are responsible to prepare the youth for further education and for their future roles in society. There can be no successful reforms in education without the active involvement of teachers. Therefore, empowering untrained teachers and in the context of this research, ECD practitioners, on an ongoing basis can never be over emphasized.

Community based ECD services is a key element in meeting the needs of young children. The South African government has acknowledged this during the past year through: the importance of ECD being noted in the President's State of the Nation Address, ECD being flagged as a priority and the National ECD Plan which was approved by Cabinet at the end of 2012.

Every educational intervention programme aims to improve the well-being and education of learners. This intervention programme was not an exception.

Although the researchers had in-depth knowledge of ECD theories, teaching and learning strategies, as well as the application of theory in practice, the ECD practitioners were fully involved in determining the contents of the intervention programme. The fact that the practitioners were involved in designing the intervention programme and that the content was contextualized to their needs, lead to a perception of 'our intervention programme' and not that of the researchers.

In-service training is often characterized by a focus on training large numbers of individuals rapidly to meet workforce demands. However, it seems that the quality of such interventions is often uneven, unpredictable and generally ineffective. Training large numbers of practitioners rapidly and hoping for knowledge acquisition and skill application without systematic support or follow-up is unlikely to be a meaningful catalyst for significant improvement or change in intervention practices. In this research the ECD practitioners were assured of continuing assistance and support from the researchers, even after the completion of the intervention programme. The researchers visited the ECD centers on a regular basis to assess whether implementation was effective and to support and assist the practitioners with challenges that they had experienced.

The researchers are of the opinion that community developers should adopt the motto of planning 'with' and not 'for' the people. This project provides proof of the effectiveness of a participatory approach in community engagement.

### CONCLUSION

Despite many positive changes in South Africa over the last few years, low quality edu-



cation in many historically disadvantaged parts of the school system still continues. It is therefore imperative to deal with this problem well knowing that it will not be easy to fix and that it will not happen overnight. However, there is a need for serious interventions that can have an effect on education and that can assist communities and learners to reach their full potential. Education can influence the future positively.

During the last few months of 2011, the researchers experienced a considerable degree of coherence, shared communal resources and mutual action as members from the groups of participants shared their expertise and developed new ways of teaching to enhance the learning and development of township Grade R learners. This has been the secret of the success of this project.

Practitioners said:

*'For the first time we have attended a workshop that has valued what we do, how and why we do what we do. Our voices have been heard on what we need to learn in order to be empowered for effective teaching. We feel very happy because this is knowledge that we know that we will use, we have tried it and it has worked, so every moment we spent here has been worth it, we are going back with knowledge we could not have had without this programme'.*

These sentiments were echoed throughout the intervention programme. The participants became more confident to teach Grade R learners and they developed an understanding of the importance of the job that they do.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made: Universities should demonstrate social responsibility by intervening in Early Childhood Development as such interventions have the potential to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. However, any form of professional development should be characterized by a two-way engagement, aligned with the desired outcomes and structured in a way that will lead to implementation in practice. Knowledge and skills should not stay theoretical. It is vital to give feedback about the implementation, to support implementation and to adapt the implementation in relation to the specific context. Communities can

never be used only as a means to achieve researchers' goals. Researchers should adopt an approach of planning with and not for the people. Community engagement should be based on collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions and the communities that they serve.

Although the majority of ECD practitioners do not have formal qualifications, they should be recognized for the work that they do. If not, it might result in a situation where they are marginalized because they do not meet the requirements to acquire a formal qualification. The Department of Education should continue its efforts to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood education but should at the same time assist ECD practitioners by providing them with the resources required for quality Grade R education.

The researchers hope that this research will draw attention to the importance of quality Grade R education and the role that universities can play in this regard.

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