

## **Early Childhood Education in South African Townships: Academics Accepting the Challenge to Empower Early Childhood Development Practitioners**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper presents a descriptive study of an Early Childhood Development (ECD) intervention project, grounded in a community-based research approach that resulted in a wide range of learning and development opportunities for children in townships in Gauteng, Vaal Triangle in South Africa. During the implementation phase, ECD student teachers and lecturers at the North-West University (NWU), Vaal Triangle campus participated. Data was gathered through questionnaires and interviews. The outcomes of this intervention varied. Reflection from practitioners, lecturers and students indicates that this intervention has started to address the learning needs of Grade R (the year before formal schooling starts) ECD practitioners and as a result, children in these townships. This article discusses an ECD intervention project that impacted on the quality of teaching and learning in township ECD centers in townships in the Vaal Triangle.

### **INTRODUCTION**

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. Interventions aimed at improving early childhood development could increase school attendance numbers and the pass rates of learners in primary and secondary schools. In a country with high levels of poverty and large numbers of learners coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, early childhood education can play a significant role in getting children school-ready in order that the formal school system can focus on developing them towards responsible adulthood. In 2011, Grade three learners in South Africa achieved only 35% in literacy and 28% in numeracy, exposing serious problems with teaching and learning in Grade R and the Foundation Phase (Bateman 2012; Gradin 2013). Formal schooling 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.

Early childhood development can be defined as programmes, activities and experiences aimed at promoting the overall health and education of

children under the age of nine years (Preston et al. 2012). Early childhood development and education services are defined as interventions that aim to support the cognitive, emotional, physical and social development of children before the age of formal schooling. These services are conducted by early childhood care- and educational institutions that serve in different ways, such as daycare centers and primary schools catering for pre-school children (Kartal 2007). Investments made in the early childhood years are made for the future of societies. The results of these interventions can be summarized as follows: programmes that have a positive effect on children's cognitive development and school achievement, especially in low-economic environments (Kartal 2007); learning motivation, including social and emotional adaptability; and physical development. The impact of these interventions is even more significant in the sense that poor and illiterate families become more aware of the importance of education and that these programmes decrease the differences caused by socio-economic factors. Interventions in early childhood development have the potential to break the cycle of poverty and inequality (Bateman 2012). For every year that the average schooling level of a population is raised, there is a corresponding increase of 3.7% in long term economic growth (Collins and Wiseman 2012).

Quality ECD interventions hold significant benefits in terms of school readiness and achievement, particularly among poor children. It is evident that investments in human capital at the pre-school stage yield higher levels of return than investments made in adults who have left school. It is also argued that if the quality of schooling in South Africa was where it should have been, the Gross Domestic product would be R550 billion higher (23% above the current level of growth). According to Kartal (2007) and Steyn et al. (2011), early childhood development forms the basis of human development and provides financial resources in the long term. Investing in the early years of a child gives children a good start in life and offers good economic returns (Bateman 2012). However, the financial implications of early childhood development prevent the neediest of all from benefiting from these services.

The South African Minister of Basic Education argues 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. They are responsible to prepare the youth for further education and for their future roles in society (Motsekga 2011). The South African Deputy President (Motlanthe 2011) and Marias et al. (2011), support this view when stating that well-trained and motivated teachers are key to delivering quality education and that one of government's roles is to facilitate training and to support teachers on an ongoing basis. Although a number of South African ECD practitioners are enrolled for or have achieved some form of ECD qualifications, it is apparent that both enrolments and achievements are far too low to service the needs of the expanding sector. Motlanthe (2011) further states that teachers themselves have to take responsibility for their own professional development and that they should be held accountable for enhancing learning and teaching outcomes as there can be no successful reforms in education without the active involvement of teachers. Professional development is not easy, it takes time and for teachers in rural areas it is even more difficult because of travel and distances. To engage in professional development is a mind-set, it becomes a habit and eventually an integral part of a person's personality achieved through being open to life-long learning (Johnson 2013). However, some communities may require experts to

facilitate or guide teachers' knowledge, competences and reflection (De Clercq and Phiri 2013).

Teacher's attitudes towards their educational practices have an influence on their classroom effectiveness and behavior (Shaw et al. 1973; Tok 2011). Several studies have reported positive changes in teacher's attitudes as a result of training (Wenger et al. 2002; Tok 2011). According to Carleton et al. (2008) the self-efficacy belief held by teachers has a determining role in their emotions, thought, behaviours and attitudes related to teaching. In the same way their training experiences have an influence on their attitudes towards teaching. Attitudes are often negative because training programmes are not experienced as functional. Tok (2011) supports this statement when arguing that if everything stays theoretical, that what is learned will not be useful in future.

### **The Theoretical and Conceptual Roots of ECD**

Everything that we embark upon in the education domain is related to social reconstruction, which is embedded in aspects linked to social transformation (Alexander et al. 2010). It is argued that ECD principles emanate from foundational applied behavior and analytical principles related to teaching and learning (Greer 2002; Catania 2006), from adult learning theory, from models for improving performance and from models in elementary and secondary education. These influences include initial preparation practices and practices associated with ongoing education or learning experiences designed to support, improve or change practice. The terms 'personnel preparation' and 'personnel development' are often used in literature and include both pre-service and in-service training.

Early childhood teaching is a complex endeavor (Blank 2011). Questions like: 'What constitutes a qualified ECD teacher?' and 'What is high-quality early childhood education?' are often asked. The answer is often that teachers with a formal teaching qualification are well qualified. However, many South African early childhood practitioners have no formal training for educating and developing the young child. Thus, requiring a formal qualification for educating young children may result in marginalizing these practitioners who may not have access to acquire the necessary education (Blank 2011). We

need to identify what works well and makes a difference, but we also need to identify those areas which need to be addressed and then act to improve these. This can be seen in many initiatives and programmes run by Non- Government Organisations, social partners and non-profit organizations (Strydom 2011).

In-service training is often characterized by a 'crisis mentality' with efforts focused on training large numbers of individuals rapidly to meet workforce demands (Snyder et al. 2011). The quality of such interventions is, however, often described as uneven, unpredictable and generally ineffective with regards to intended outcomes (De Clercq and Phiri 2013).

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 (Snyder et al. 2011). General education and adult learning literature suggest that personnel preparation and reform efforts need to incorporate underlying assumptions about individual and systemic change. These assumptions include comprehensive and long-term approaches, practitioners that recognize the difference between their current and desired knowledge and skills, practitioner participation in development of knowledge, skills and dispositions. Professional development should be facilitated through teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of knowledge in practice.

Any conceptual framework for professional development should include the 'who' (learner), the 'what' (content) and the 'how' (facilitation). The emphasis on the 'who' is a reminder that practitioners vary widely with respect to their qualifications, experience, race, 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. The 'how' helps to identify the most promising professional development approaches. Professional development is more likely to enhance teaching and learning when it has the following elements:

- Consists of content specific rather than general instruction
- Is aligned with instructional goals, learning standards 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).

It is thus essential to identify clear objectives, to present theory about 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 and 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).

The development needs and challenges of poor and marginalised people should play a crucial role during the engagement between universities and communities (Alexander et al. 2010; De Clercq and Phiri 2013). Through their participation, community members are in a position to give a realistic picture of the reality on the ground (Moyo and Ndlovu 2012). However, literature indicates that the majority of development projects are initiated by outsiders and that these projects are rarely founded spontaneously by the community itself (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000). 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.

Remarks from community members in this regard include:

*"They arrive already knowing everything. They come here and look around, but they see only what is not here" (Indian Villager) Source?*

*"Developers come overnight they just arrived. They did not tell the people. They made us think that they were coming to save us" (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000).*

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 developing 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 communi-

ty needs and opportunities through the eyes of the end-beneficiaries (Dudley 1993; Ennis and West 2013). Therefore, participation often starts after projects have already been designed and community participation in such cases is nothing more than attempts to convince beneficiaries what is best for them. Community engagement refers to collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions and the communities that they serve. 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). Development professionals should thus adopt the motto of planning with and not for the people. This should lead to a change from being an implementing agent to being a facilitator. For this reason, the participants in this research were fully involved in determining the contents of the training programme.

Available literature regarding ECD training mostly focuses on describing the structural features of the intervention and its contents (Snyder et al. 2011). There is thus 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 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 paper discusses an ECD intervention project initiated by the North West University (NWU) Vaal Triangle Campus that impacted on the quality of teaching and learning in township ECD centers in the Vaal Triangle of the Gauteng Province.

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

In 2011 the researcher engaged in a 10 month long community-based research project. The project was conceived after reading and reflecting on the empirical and theoretical context for the work.

There is a serious shortage of well-trained teachers (specifically in South African townships) for early childhood development (Steyn et al. 2011). The aim of the intervention project was to empower Grade R ECD practitioners from township ECD centers with knowledge and skills that could 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 practitioners who participated in this project had no formal training for educating and developing Grade R learners and they manage their ECD centers with minimum resources (Letseka 2013).

They had some practical experience in the ECD field. The participants indicated that because of the fact that they had no formal qualifications, nobody takes what they do in terms of teaching and learning seriously.

A participant revealed that:

*'I have standard 8. I attended a course but it was more about cleanliness but not to learn the child. I cannot do the activities. I do not have knowledge of how I am supposed to teach learners'.*

Together, these practitioners were responsible for the early childhood development of about 8000 Grade R learners.

The intervention took place over a ten month period in 2011. It involved lecturers and student teachers from the NWU, Vaal Triangle campus and two hundred and fifty Grade R (the year before formal schooling starts) ECD practitioners from township ECD centers in the Vaal Triangle. The lecturers were well qualified and had in depth knowledge of ECD theories, teaching and learning strategies as well as the application of theory in practice. The students were in their final year of completing their four year degrees in ECD and possessed the knowledge and skills that were needed for the training of ECD practitioners. The practitioners were involved in determining the contents of the training programme.

Lecturers and students presented classes on two Saturdays per month. All classes involved theory and practical application under the supervision of the lecturers and students. The practitioners were expected to implement what they have learnt during the training in the teaching of their Grade R learners at their respective ECD centers. Practical examples of the learners' work had to be submitted at the start of each class. Each class started with a session on reflection during which challenges and successes in the implementation of knowledge and skills were discussed.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The educational framework supporting the community-based research approach to teach-



ing and learning lies in adult education and it focuses on the learner having some control over the learning process and experience (Levin and Martin 2007).

Berman (2011) states that there is a serious need for universities to demonstrate social responsibility and a commitment to the common good. Community-based research enhances the practical experience of the student and teacher. Similar to teaching, research is a core university business and as a key site for engaged scholarship, particularly in the form of applied research. However, in an environment that rewards publication, there is at present little recognition and incentive for engaged scholarship (Winter et al. 2006). Community-based research has its roots in applied research and is outcome-directed with benefits to communities. The contribution of this form of research lies in integrating theory with practice and creative production with the challenge of enhancing active citizenship (Berman 2011). Research that focuses on specific community issues or that provides a point of university access for community members is a structural and functional indicator of an engagement agenda within universities. For most universities it is presently a newer form of scholarship. Although a strong pragmatism is evident in strategies of engagement, many universities highlight social and cultural enrichment as a form of engagement (Hills and Mullet 2000; Winter et al 2006).

Boyer (1990) proposes four necessary and interrelated forms of scholarship that together amount to what is referred to as 'scholarship of engagement'. The first element in his model is referred to as 'scholarship of discovery' which closely resembles the notion of research and contributes to the total stock of human knowledge. The second element is termed 'scholarship of integration' and underscores the need for scholars to give meaning to their discovery by putting it in perspective and interpreting it in relation to other discoveries and forms of knowledge. The third element, 'scholarship of application' focuses on the fact that knowledge is not produced in a linear fashion as 'theory' leads to 'practice' and 'practice' leads to 'theory'. Through reflection and community-based research, viewed and practiced as a scholarly activity, the context for a dialogue between theory and practice is provided. The final element in the model is termed 'scholarship of teaching'.

Within the framework of a scholarship of engagement, the traditional roles of teacher and learner become blurred and what emerges is a learning community including community members, students, academic staff and service providers.

According to Hollander (2009) and Berman (2011) many researchers generate little scholarship in this manner as the tools for improving practice might overlap with the tools of the university researcher. However, the manner in which the researcher asks questions, the manner in which the study is grounded in the literature, the higher standards held in employing the very same tools than practitioners may use and honoring participants' voices while maintaining conventional academic requirements, make such work scholarship and sets it apart from the world of practice.

A mixed method research design was utilized for this research (Creswell 2009). Both questionnaires (quantitative) and interviews (qualitative) were used as research instruments. The questionnaire items were aimed at determining the ECD practitioners' knowledge and understanding of some of the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of Grade R learners, namely counting, sequencing, sorting, recognizing shapes and colours, stories, songs, motor skills, visual and auditory exercises. The questionnaires were administered before the formal start of the project and the responses to the questionnaire items were used as the basis for designing a training programme for empowering ECD practitioners. In order to determine whether the participants gained more knowledge and understanding about the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on school readiness, the same questionnaire was administered five months after the training started. The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with all two hundred the participants five months after the training started. The interviews were conducted to determine if the practitioners experienced any challenges in implementing the knowledge and skills that they have acquired through the training.

### Population and Sample

The population of this research comprised of Grade R ECD practitioners in townships in the Gauteng province of South Africa. A purpo-

sive research sample of two hundred and fifty Grade R ECD practitioners was drawn from a township in the Gauteng province. Purposive sampling is based on the judgment of the researcher and is composed of elements that contain the most common characteristics of the population (Creswell 2009). In this manner information rich sources were selected from which a great deal could be learned (Maree 2010). The research sample represented more than 10% of the population.

### **Ethical Measures**

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Department of Health. All the participants were informed about the nature and aim of the research and all completed informed consent forms. The participants were assured that their personal information would be treated as confidential and that they could withdraw from the research at any time. The participants gave permission that the research findings could be published.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The data obtained from the responses to the questionnaire that was administered before the training started indicated that the practitioners had very limited knowledge and understanding of the basic content of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of Grade R learners. The participants could not identify or define counting, sequencing, sorting, recognizing shapes and colours, stories, songs, motor skills, visual and auditory exercises. The data further revealed that teaching and learning did not focus on this very basic content.

Based on the above responses, the ECD training programme was then designed to equip the practitioners with knowledge and skills of the basic contents of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of Grade R learners.

Data obtained from the responses to the questionnaire that was administered five months after the training started, indicated a significant improvement in the knowledge and skills of the ECD practitioners. The data revealed improvement in the following areas:

- Teaching methodology
- Practitioners' program content knowledge
- Learners' participation in the classroom

- Learners' school readiness
- Parent acknowledgement of the role that the ECD centers play in the education of their children
- A more positive attitude of the practitioners

The majority of the participants were able to identify and define counting, sequencing, sorting, recognizing shapes and colours, stories, songs, motor skills, visual and auditory exercises. The data further revealed that they tried to implement what they have learned in the teaching of their learners.

Practical examples of the learners' work had to be submitted at the start of each class. It became evident that the learners were participating in school readiness activities. Although the activities were done with minimum resources it was positive to note that real learning was happening in the centers.

Each class started with a session on reflection during which challenges and successes in the implementation of knowledge and skills were discussed. During these sessions, the practitioners stated that they implemented what they have learned and that they were noticing significant improvements in the knowledge and skills of their learners.

The above data supports the arguments of Marais et al. (2011), Wenger et al. (2002), Tok (2011) and Butler - Adam (2013) namely that quality ECD interventions yield significant benefits in terms of school-readiness and achievement, particularly among poor children. It further shows improvement in the knowledge and skills of the practitioners which 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). The practitioners were equipped with knowledge and skills that will enable them to fill the demands of the workforce (Snyder et al. 2011). The data that was obtained from the responses to the interview questions supported the findings from the quantitative data. The majority of the participants 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.

One of the participants said that:

*'You teach different methods, I now know how to involve the learners. Before the course,*

*I did no activities in classes.*

Another participant stated that:

*'Before, I was just teaching without knowledge. When you teach us, the Monday I go and do it in classes.*

A practitioner indicated that:

*'This course will make parents see that it is OK to bring their children to our centers. It can make children clever'.*

According to the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (2013) South African primary school teachers generally have poor subject knowledge in language and mathematics and consequently an incomplete understanding of the requirements of the curriculum. There is an equal serious shortage of well-trained teachers for early childhood development in South African townships (Steyn et al. 2011). Masondo Gradin (2013) argues that for most learners in townships, the standard of education is of poor quality. He further states that good education can only be accessed by the middle and elite classes in our communities. However, the responses of the participants in this study indicated that they have improved their knowledge and skills and are able to provide higher quality education to their learners. The data is consistent with the literature by Kartal (2007), Steyn et al. (2011) and (2013), namely that in a country with high levels of poverty, pre-school education can play a significant role in getting children school-ready. The data further indicates that parents are more positive towards ECD practitioners and that as a result, more children are being educated at the ECD centers.

However, the data gathered from the responses to the remaining interview questions, revealed that although the Grade R ECD practitioners were being empowered in terms of teaching the basic contents of an ECD programme focusing on school readiness, they experienced numerous challenges in implementing their newly acquired knowledge and skills. The following themes were identified:

### **Health Problems**

The participants indicated that they had learners who were disabled, who suffered from epileptic attacks and who were HIV positive in their classes.

A practitioner indicated that:

*'I have got a disabled child in my school. She only lies there. I have 3 children that are HIV positive and I have a child that has fits'.*

The practitioners revealed that they had no knowledge or skills to deal with these learners.

### **Socio-Economic Issues**

The practitioners said that they had to teach orphaned learners and that many of the parents were not employed. For this reason the participants are faced with a lack of the physical resources and equipment needed to teach Grade R learners.

A practitioner said that:

*'They get money from the government, R200 per child...then they have three children to get money but they don't pay me'.*

Another practitioner indicated that:

*'I have 10 children who are orphans. They are poor and don't have food and clothes. I have no tables, chairs, no paint, crayons and no story books'.*

One of the practitioners revealed that:

*'They write on the floor because I have no tables. I only have tyres outside for them to play on I have only one brush...we have to wait for one to finish. I also do not have crayons and paper'.*

It became clear that socio-economic issues impacted negatively on the implementation of their newly gained knowledge and skills as they were not in a position to fund the resources that they needed to do so effectively.

### **A Lack of Sponsors**

The practitioners indicated that because of the fact that they had no sponsors, they often have to borrow money to buy food to feed the learners. Some of the practitioners got porridge from their respective churches.

A participant said that:

*'I cry a lot...I can do nothing about the situation. I sometimes want to quit. I have no sponsors; I only depend on the children's money'.*

Another participant stated that:

*'I have 24 children, sometimes 12 pay. In the winter I don't have heaters...the parents don't pay'.*

### **A Lack of Parental Involvement**

The participants stated that due to a lack of parental involvement learners are often late or absent. These learners do not progress in their work and will not be ready for formal schooling.

Many parents never communicate with the ECD practitioners and can therefore not support their children with their schoolwork.

A practitioner reported that:

*'Sometimes I have to take children to the clinic if they are sick. The parents are not educated. They do not take the ECD seriously'.*

Another participant said that:

*'The learner has a difficulty.....I write them a letter to help with the homework, they do not do it'.*

Without the commitment and support of parents, ECD practitioners find it difficult to implement their knowledge and skills and this results in a situation where learners will not be fully prepared for formal schooling.

The data obtained from the interviews with the Grade R ECD practitioners clearly indicated that they face many obstacles and challenges in the implementation of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of learners. The data also made it evident that many of the practitioners find it difficult to create an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning.

I decided to conclude each interview with the following question:

*'If you experience so many challenges in the teaching and learning of your learners and also have to do the best with the minimum resources, why are you still a Grade R ECD practitioner?'*

One of the participants responded as follows:

*'Sometimes I cook food and sell it. I have a friend who works at the clinic. In winter she gives me tablets'.*

Another participant said:

*'The love of the children. I want them to have a future. My brother sends me R200, and then I share it with the children'.*

A participant answered the question as follows:

*'I even pray. I can see children suffering because of being poor, I feel sorry for them. Can I chase them away?'*

Strydom (2011) asks the following question: *'..is this negative, all lost picture really all there is to education in our country?'* and then answers it by stating that *'....there are people and schools and organisations doing what must be done – changing the lives of children and shaping the future'.*

Phillips and Hatch (1999) and Tok (2011) argue that many teachers choose teaching because they like children, enjoy challenges and

want to make a difference in children's lives. The responses to the above interview question support this statement. However, it seems that Grade R ECD practitioners do not receive the admiration that used to be linked to the profession. Although teaching is a profession that guides minds and builds the character of learners for the future, it is often said that teaching is a very noble job and although it might sometimes be very rewarding, it does require a level of commitment that most other jobs don't.

The community has an obligation towards the school and therefore towards teachers and ECD practitioners as well. Much as the community expects miracles from these practitioners, it has to become part of the school.

## CONCLUSION

A community of practice producing specific capabilities is characterized by coherence and shared communal resources that members have developed over time. During the last few months of 2011 the researcher experienced a considerable degree of coherence and mutual action as lecturers, students and Grade R ECD practitioners shared their expertise and developed new ways of teaching to enhance the learning and development of township Grade R ECD learners.

As an academic it was rewarding for me to work collaboratively with a group of Grade R ECD practitioners. It was a valuable experience to work in a non-traditional learning setting. Many of the skills that the students who were involved in the training programme acquired can be transferred between academic and non-academic work. They had an opportunity to build and improve their skills and learned how to respectfully and successfully engage in community-based-research.

Good teachers do not have to be perfect teachers. The Grade R ECD practitioners indicated that they felt empowered in terms of knowledge and skills needed for teaching the basic contents of an ECD programme focusing on the school readiness of Grade R learners. Lecturers and students stated that initially they held stereotypical beliefs and had limited information about the needs and challenges of ECD practitioners in townships. They did not expect that these practitioners were so passionate about the teaching of Grade R learners. However, once the



lecturers and students became engaged with the practitioners, they learned that the practitioners wanted to improve their skills and knowledge but also that they were faced with numerous challenges in the implementation thereof.

The researcher observed that the negotiated, reflective practice impacted positively on the training and empowerment of township Grade R ECD practitioners. The intervention resulted in improved quality in the teaching and learning situation in these ECD centers and also enhanced the professional development of students and lecturers. This can be reflected in the words of a practitioner who wrote:

*'Maaaam, I am so happy. I can now start a school anywhere. I wish I can attend again next year'.*

There are limitations to this research. By working in one community there is a limit to the generalisability of the results. Future research could include Grade R ECD practitioners from more township ECD centers. However, the researcher would argue that the aim of this intervention project, which was to empower Grade R ECD practitioners from township ECD centers with skills that offer them the opportunity to earn a living, but more importantly, to care, teach and develop society's most vulnerable members, namely young children, had started to be realized. Evidence of this could be drawn from the data obtained from the responses of the practitioners to the questionnaire items as well as from their responses during the interviews.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made: ECD practitioners need to be empowered to be able to provide quality Grade R education. In this regard 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. The development needs and challenges of poor and marginalized people should play a crucial role during the engagement between universities and communities. Community engagement should be based on collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions and the communities that they serve. Universities should not underrate and under-value the capacities of local people but should view commu-

nity needs and opportunities through the eyes of the end-beneficiaries. A two-way engagement, whereby knowledge, skills, expertise and resources required to develop and sustain a developing society is availed, should be the aim.

ECD practitioners should be recognized for the work that they do. The Department of Health should empower ECD practitioners to be able to deal with learners suffering from health problems. The Department of Education as well as the private sector should assist ECD practitioners by providing them with the physical resources required for quality Grade R education. In order for learners to be successful, it is important that parents become more involved in the education of their children. Lines of communication should be created between the ECD practitioners and parents.

The researcher hopes 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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