

Obstacles in Implementing Innovative Practices in Early Childhood Development Centers

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ABSTRACT In this paper a descriptive study of an early childhood development (ECD) intervention project aimed at improving the knowledge and skills of Grade R (the year before formal schooling) practitioners is discussed. During the early stages of the project the researchers observed that the morale of the practitioners (sometimes referred to as teachers with no formal qualifications) was low. A decision was taken to address this problem before the official intervention project would commence. A program, focusing on innovative practices was designed. The practitioners revealed that they experienced numerous challenges in implementing innovative practices. The management skills of managers (sometimes referred to as principals with no formal training) of the ECD centers, was the most critical challenge. Through a qualitative research design, grounded in a community-based research approach, limitations in the management skills of managers were identified. These limitations will be addressed in a next intervention project. The initial intervention project will then be reintroduced.

INTRODUCTION

Through investments in early childhood development social inequalities caused by adverse environments can be reduced as such environments hamper the development of young children. The effects of these investments are extremely significant in the sense that poor and illiterate families become more aware of the importance of education and that early childhood development programs decrease the differences caused by socioeconomic factors (Kartal 2007; Butler-Adam 2013; Msila 2014; Pardo and Woodrow 2014). In a country with high levels of poverty, preschool education can play a substantial role in getting children ready for school (Kartal 2007; Steyn et al. 2011; Fourie 2014; Alameen 2015; Berlinski and Norbert 2015).

It is a well known fact that a school environment that contributes to quality teaching and learning consists of various elements, including managers' and practitioners' high-quality capacity, a school culture and climate conducive to teaching and learning, a sound school organizational structure, committed school teams, effective human resource management, effective resource management, efficient conflict resolution, and noble school-community relationships (Tok 2011). The South African Minister of Education (Motsekga 2010) as well as Azam (2014) assert that the strongest pillar of any nation is teachers, as they are the ones who impart knowledge,

skills and values to learners who are the future adults of the country. According to Azam (2014), the success of any education system is established through the quality of teachers, as they play a vital role in building the character and personality of young children. Contrariwise, there is a shortage of well-trained teachers for early childhood development in South African townships (Steyn et al. 2011; Atmore 2013; Fourie 2013). Consequently, the standard of education for most learners in disadvantaged areas is of poor quality (Azam 2014). Practitioners moreover have to teach grade R learners in environments that are not encouraging quality teaching and learning. In South Africa, township ECD centers are considered low-economic environments and practitioners have to perform their teaching duties without the basic resources (Fourie 2014).

There is evidence that the morale of educators in township ECD centers is low. Research conducted on the wellbeing of South African educators, makes it evident that many educators do not experience their workplaces as positive (Jackson and Rothmann 2006; Fourie 2014). The behavior of principals as well as educators, according to these investigations, does not contribute positively towards the development and establishment of environments conducive to teaching and learning (Jackson and Rothmann 2006; Vos et al. 2012). However, intervention programs can lead to positive changes in a teacher's attitudes and towards establishing more con-

ducive teaching and learning environments (Tok 2011; Askeil-Williams and Murray-Harvey 2015). In the context of this research, educational intervention programs aim to improve the wellbeing and education of learners (Scarinci et al. 2015). It is therefore vital to deal with these complexities before it can be expected that anything would change as far as education in South Africa is concerned.

Early childhood educators are critical to high quality ECD provisioning that supports noble outcomes for learners (Cumming et al. 2015). It is often contended that only teachers with formal teaching qualifications are well qualified. Nevertheless, many South African early childhood practitioners have no formal qualifications (Preston et al. 2012; Msila 2014). Necessitating a formal qualification for educating young children may therefore result in demoting these practitioners who may not have access to acquire the necessary education (Blank 2011; Pardo and Woodrow 2014; Scarinci et al. 2015). There is a need to identify alternative routes for the professional development of ECD practitioners. This can be seen in many initiatives and programs by non-government organizations, social partners and non-profit organizations (Strydom 2011).

Literature Review

In 2014 and 2015 the researchers implemented a professional development intervention project aimed at empowering ECD practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to teach Grade R learners. The intervention project was facilitated through teaching and learning experiences that were transactional and designed to support the acquisition of knowledge in practice. During the early stages of this intervention project the researchers observed that the morale of the ECD practitioners was low. They had no formal qualifications, they had to perform their duties with minimum resources, they were faced with numerous challenges, including health issues, for example learners and parents suffering from HIV/AIDS, socio-economic problems leading to non-payment of learners' school fees, a lack of parental involvement as well as a lack of any form of financial support. The above issues resulted in a situation where most of the practitioners did not experience their work environments to be positive. The majority of the prac-

tioners revealed a negative attitude towards their work.

Supporting quotes from practitioners include the following:

'We are short of play apparatus. We don't have enough material to teach, no educational toys'.

'I cry a lot, the parents don't pay... I can do nothing about the situation. If I tell, the principal will reject me'.

'I don't take initiative or risk as much as I'd like to, as I don't have the confidence. The staff needs some training'.

'There is lack of support from parents'.

'We have a dirty center and no security to protect the crèche'.

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

'The principal at my center says my creativity is too much for the kids'.

Based on the above assertions, the researchers were of the opinion that knowledge and skills of innovative practices could positively impact the morale and attitude of the practitioners and as a result, on the quality of teaching and learning at the ECD centers. Innovation refers to the act of introducing new ideas, concepts and designs to create affluence and improved results. In the innovation process, creativity leads to development (Mishra 2015). The implementation of what is developed is innovation (Ehigie and McAndrew 2005; Dobni et al. 2015). Innovation can therefore be seen as the deliberate application of information, initiative and imagination in delivering different values from resources and includes all processes through which new ideas are generated and implemented. Innovative teaching leads to creative learning and the implementation of new methods and contents. Innovation is synonymous with risk-taking (Mishra 2015). The practitioners in this research recognized that there was a gap between their current and desired knowledge and skills and that they needed to gain knowledge and skills towards being more innovative (De Clercq and Phiri 2013). They were however concerned about the amount of extra work that the implementation of innovative practices could create.

Professional development should be characterized by facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the attainment of knowledge in practice

(Snyder et al. 2011; Moyo and Ndlovu 2012; Askell-Williams and Murray-Harvey 2015). The development needs and challenges of poor and demotivated people should play a crucial role during the engagement between universities and communities (Alexander et al. 2010; De Clercq and Phiri 2013; Fitzgerald and Zientek 2015).

In cooperation with the practitioners, a training program was designed to equip them with knowledge and skills focusing on innovative practices in order to create environments conducive to teaching and learning. The intention was furthermore to build the ECD practitioners' self-confidence, to reduce their fear for rejection, to change the belief that innovation was dependent on expensive resources, to motivate them to take risks, and to accept that they will make mistakes, which all together would result in elevated morale of ECD practitioners.

At the end of the training program the researchers conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with all the participants in order to determine the success of the implementation of innovative practices as well as the challenges that the ECD practitioners might have experienced during the implementation of the knowledge and skills that they have acquired during the training.

Data obtained from the face-to-face, semi-structured interviews revealed that the practitioners were more motivated towards their daily work, their self-confidence increased, they understood that that innovation was not dependent on costly resources, they were prepared to take risks, and they accepted that they will make mistakes but also understood that this is all right. Innovation must be driven by principles and practices, which support creativity to change systems and environments (Mishra 2015). The practitioners in this research experienced numerous challenges in implementing innovative practices at their respective ECD centers.

Although practitioners are key figures in constructing a creative environment, they do need support from their managers, which according to the findings of this research is not the case in the ECD centers where these participants practice. The data obtained from this research revealed that there were no funds available to buy the basic equipment and materials needed for effective teaching and learning, parental involvement was limited, there was a lack of communication between managers and practitioners, and it

became clear that the participants' fear for rejection persisted. It also became evident that the most serious obstacle in the practitioners' efforts to implement innovative practices was the lack of management skills of the managers of ECD centers.

Supporting quotes from practitioners include the following:

'The principal is not a good manager. Many times the owner is not at school, there is no rule, and there is no trained staff, no communication with teachers as well as parents'.

'She does not make arrangement to meet parents as they are the ones who make payment to let them pay on time and tell them that money does all the things at school. Parents don't pay the fees on time. There is not enough food'.

'She does not know what is going on in the center, what is available, and what is not. She does not attain quality through everyone's commitment on a daily basis'.

'The principal is irresponsible and doesn't have the qualities to run an ECD center. She has poor management skills to run a quality ECD center'.

'No time for management. Parents don't pay the fees on time. Not enough food'.

'The owner doesn't keep records of the children. The children don't have enough material to learn'.

Of greatest concern is especially the areas of financial management, general administration, absence (mainly of managers) from the center, a lack of communication with parents and practitioners, record keeping, managing teaching and learning, a lack of resources, and minimal or no staff development. In this regard, Blatchford and Manni (in Ang 2012), Pardo and Woodrow (2014), and Nicholson and Kroll (2015) posit that effective management and appropriate training for the management role are increasingly important for providing high-quality provision for the early years, especially in the context of larger and sometimes more complex, multi-professional teams of staff. Although research indicates that leadership only indirectly affects learners' outcomes, managers are key agents for building the school's organizational capacity and for creating the cultural and structural conditions for meaningful and effective teaching and learning to take place (Kadji-Beltran et al. 2013; Cumming 2015).

Effective educational management is generally accepted as being essential in achieving organizational improvement (Aubrey et al. 2013). Educational management involves a process of planning, organizing, leading and controlling school employees and activities, and using all available resources to reach identified educational goals (Mafora and Phorabatho 2013; Soria-Garcia and Martinez-Lorente 2014; Alameen et al. 2015). These constituents of management also apply to managing the implementation of innovative practices at township ECD centers. Planning involves setting objectives and determining a course of action for achieving those objectives. Planning further requires that managers are aware of environmental conditions facing their organizations and that they are able to and knowledgeable enough to predict future conditions. It also requires that managers are good decision-makers. Decision-making is a management task aimed at ensuring that the ECD center's purpose, mission, goals and strategies are understood by all stakeholders (Mafora and Phorabatho 2013). Organization involves the development of an organizational or hierarchical structure and the allocation of human resources to ensure that objectives are reached. Leading involves the social and informal sources of influence that a manager uses to inspire action taken by others (Soria-Garcia and Martinez-Lorente 2014). This implies that managers should lead and guide practitioners towards the attainment of agreed upon goals of the ECD center. Controlling involves ensuring that performance does not deviate from standards and determining the extent to which strategies are applied (Cevher-Kalburan 2014).

Agasisti et al. (2012) as well as Alameen (2015) assert that managers should have a high-level capacity for strategic planning and day-by-day management since schools have to offer programs and services that must meet an increasingly wide range of learner and community needs. Managers of ECD centers have the authority and autonomy to organize decision-making processes, to promote strategies and actions, and to define priorities and activities for managing the implementation of innovative practices. However, in a study done by Fitzgerald (in Krieg et al. 2014) regarding indigenous women's perceptions and experiences of being managers, one of the participants said, '*...it's like a dance, really and very hard to keep up with time if you cannot*

hear the music or don't understand the steps'. This assertion confirms statements by Mafora and Phorabatho (2013), that the development of the basic skills of managers (in the context of this research, managers of ECD centers) has not received sufficient attention in the past, and therefore the continuing professional learning of those leading early childhood development should become a critical aspect of educational reform. The contribution of effective management to improve organizational performance and raising achievement remains unequivocal (Krieg et al. 2014; Rouse and Spradbury 2015).

Based on the above discussion it becomes evident that in order to improve learning environments, there is a need to identify limitations in management practices at ECD centers. Once limitations have been identified, an intervention program can be designed to assist managers in managing the implementation of innovative practices. Available literature relating to the management of ECD centers mostly emphasizes the operational features of an intervention program and its contents (Snyder et al. 2011; Fourie 2014). Limited empirical research exists to guide researchers in terms of the management of implementing what was learned during an intervention program. Research conducted by Snyder et al. (2011) indicates that most research conducted in the ECD field focuses on in-service training and staff development aimed at improving subject content knowledge and skills. No literature pertaining to shortcomings in the management of implementing what was learned during an intervention program could be found. There is thus a need to advance the scientific basis of the management of implementation efforts. This research aims to address the gap in literature by identifying limitations in managing the implementation of innovative practices in township ECD centers in the Vaal Triangle region of the Gauteng Province in South Africa.

Aim of the Research Project

In 2014 the researchers engaged in an 8-month long community-based research project. The project was conceived after reading and reflecting on the empirical and theoretical context of the field of study. The aim of the research project was to implement an intervention project aimed at empowering ECD practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to teach Grade R

learners. Based on discussions with the practitioners, the initial aim of the research project was changed to the implementation of a training program aimed at equipping practitioners with knowledge and skills of innovative practices. Feedback regarding the successes and challenges experienced during the implementation of innovative practices indicated a serious lack in the management skills of the managers of ECD centers. Therefore, the aim of this research project was converted to 'identifying limitations in managing and supporting the implementation of innovative practices at township ECD centers'. The aim of the entire research project was translated into the following research objectives:

- To determine if the ECD practitioners gained knowledge and skills of innovative practices.
- To determine if the knowledge and skills gained during the intervention program were implemented at the ECD centers.
- To determine the success of the implementation of innovative practices.
- To determine challenges in the implementation of innovative practices.
- To identify limitations in managing and supporting the implementation of knowledge and skills to teach Grade R learners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The educational framework supporting the community-based research approach lies in adult education and it focuses on the learner having some control over the learning process and experience (Levin and Martin 2007). Community-based research enhances the practical experience of the student and teacher. This form of research has its foundations in applied research and is outcome-oriented with advantages to communities (Sobrero and Jayaratne 2014). Theory is integrated with practice and creative production with the challenge of improving active citizenship (Berman 2011; Fourie 2014). Through reflection and community-based research, viewed and practiced as a scholarly activity, the context for a dialogue between theory and practice is provided (Sobrero and Jayaratne 2014; Fitzgerald and Zientek 2015). The traditional roles of a teacher and learner become indistinct and what emerges is a learning community including community members and researchers.

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 researcher. However, the way in which the researcher asks questions, the manner in which the study is grounded in the literature, the higher standards in employing the very same tools than practitioners may use, and honoring the participants' voices while maintaining academic requirements, make such a work scholarship and sets it apart from the world of practice (Sobrero and Jayaratne 2014; Fitzgerald and Zientek 2015).

A qualitative research design was utilized for this research (Creswell 2014). According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research developed in social and human sciences as a reaction to the view that human beings can be studied in the same way as objects. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as multi-method focused, involving an interpretive and 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. Both open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were utilized as research instruments. The open-ended questionnaires were administered when the researchers became aware of the fact that the managers of ECD centers did not have the necessary knowledge and skills to manage the implementation of innovative practices. The aim of administering the questionnaires was to determine shortcomings in knowledge and skills concerning the management of implementing innovative practices. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with all the participants were conducted to generate data on detailed views and opinions regarding shortcomings in knowledge and skills needed to manage the implementation of innovative practices. A set of pre-determined open-ended questions on an interview schedule was developed to guide the researchers during the interviews (Maree 2010).

Through conducting face-to-face interviews with all participants, the researchers established

a relationship with them and also gained their cooperation. The interviews were audiotaped and handwritten notes were used to support the recordings. This assisted in transcribing for the purpose of analysis (Maree 2010).

Population and Sample

The population of this research comprised of Grade R early childhood development practitioners in townships in the Vaal Triangle region of the Gauteng province in South Africa. A purposive research sample of 62 practitioners was drawn from a township in the Vaal Triangle region of 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 2014). In this manner, information rich sources were selected from which a great deal could be learned (Maree 2010). The research sample represented more than ten percent of the population.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the responses to the questionnaire items made it clear that the managers of ECD centers had very limited knowledge and understanding of managing the implementation of innovative practices. The data obtained from the semi-structured face-to-face interviews was analyzed and coded. Similar codes were then aggregated into themes (Maree 2010).

The data obtained from the responses to the open-ended questionnaire items and the data generated from the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, was compared and contrasted to determine the extent to which outcomes agreed or differed. As the data correlated positively, more comprehensive and well-substantiated conclusions about limitations in managing the implementation of innovative practices could be reached and led to the identification of the themes outlined below.

Managers' Absence

The participants indicated that managers were often absent from the ECD centers. They contended that the managers' absence was the reason for them not being aware of limited resources for teaching and learning. A number of

participants revealed that managers did not know how to teach and this was the reason for being absent and never observing or monitoring any classes. Due to managers being absent, practitioners did not receive the support that they needed.

Supporting Quotes:

'The owner is never around to manage the preschool'.

'The owner does not spend enough time in the school'.

'The owner is never at work so she/he will not be able to see what the center needs'.

'She is not speaking to parents, many times the owner is not at the school'.

'The principal is not around, she never support us'.

According to Mafora and Phorabatho (2013), managers have to lead and guide teachers. Managers have to be engaged in work goals themselves before they will be in a position to engage their employees in the goals of the organization (Bakker and Xanthopoulou 2013). Managers are responsible for maintaining the daily operation of the ECD center (Cumming 2015). Monitoring should be done through classroom visits, observations and by looking at learners' work. If managers are absent from ECD centers monitoring will be impossible. A principal's values influence the school and are adopted by staff, parents and learners. Values, the school's vision and a sense of purpose created by the principal, lead to achievement just as the lack thereof leads to failure.

Management Training

The data made it evident that the managers lacked management skills and that they were ignorant with respect to the responsibilities of a manager of an ECD center. The participants further indicated that they did not know how to manage, motivate and support them at their respective ECD centers.

Supporting Quotes

'She is irresponsible and doesn't have the qualities to run an ECD center. And she has poor management skills'.

'No, not a good manager, not able to manage the center'.

'He's not running the center well'.

'She does not manage and motivate her staff'.

'She does not attain quality through everyone's commitment on a daily basis'.

'The owner does not care about the needs of the teacher or parent, no time management'.

'She is not trained for different learners who have tradition, religions, culture and beliefs'.

'The owner didn't make a daily program. The owner is not well trained to deal with children'.

Although it would be unreasonable to expect that managers should be experts in all areas of ECD, successful school managers need to be effective managers and instructional leaders (Cevher-Kalburan 2014). If principals are not good managers, early childhood practitioners will experience difficulties in taking decisions about instructional issues. The importance of managers in managing educational activities is underscored by many researchers (Kadji-Beltran et al. 2013; Mafora and Phorabatho 2013; Nicholson and Kroll 2015). The principal should create a constructive educational environment, should lead the implementation of necessary changes towards effective teaching and learning, must take responsibility for providing suitable resources, and has to provide ongoing professional development for practitioners (Mafora and Phorabatho 2013; Cevher-Kalburan 2014). In a study conducted by Aubrey et al. (2013), managers of ECD centers indicated that they allocate a small amount of time to administration and management. They also revealed that they had no training or experience to perform management tasks.

Financial Management

According to the participants, managers experienced numerous challenges pertaining to financial management. All the participants revealed that their ECD centers were not maintained in an acceptable manner. The majority of the practitioners indicated that they did not have sufficient teaching and learning resources and that the learners were not provided with nutritious meals.

Supporting Quotes

'Parents don't pay school fees on time. Don't have enough money to give them nutritious food'.

'The children don't have enough material to learn'.

'I can't do most of what I have learnt with kids, reason being lack of staff to use such as colorings, papers, glue, etc.'.

'I also use my pocket money to buy stationary to make it exciting'.

'We have no computer or office material'.

'Our center needs maintenance and lots of renovation. We have no carpet, and there is blockage of toilet and rotting of the crèche's roofing. The floors need to be repaired as they are cracking and there is lack of running water'.

Planning the teaching and learning environment is one of the most important components of successful teaching and learning. Cevher-Kalburan's (2014) study made it evident that a lack of resources, teaching and learning material, equipment, and a lack of space were not contributing to a conducive ECD teaching and learning environment. Participants in this study suggested that the support of families (cooperation with ECD managers), donations and contributing basic teaching and learning materials could improve the situation at early childhood development centers.

According to Mafora and Phorabatho (2013), practitioners at ECD centers experience problems (for example, inadequate resources), as managers do not have the skills to manage finances (Nicholson and Kroll 2015). Therefore, envisaged activities are not within the approved budget and the lack of relevant resources remains the major barrier towards effective teaching and learning.

Communication with Parents

It became clear that there was a lack of communication with the parents of learners. The data made it evident that managers did not have good communication skills and that they did not arrange parent meetings. The participants indicated that managers were afraid to speak to parents or communicate grievances with parents, because they depend on the school fees that parents have to pay.

Supporting Quotes

'She/he does not make arrangements to meet parents as they are the ones who make payment and must tell them that money does all the things at school and that start time is from and

until...no late coming or parents should arrange after care and pay for that'.

'Lack of communication by not having regular meeting with parent and amongst the staff'.

'She is not good because she never communicate with the parents and she's always away from school'.

'The owner did not speaks to the parents and all the times is not at school, the owner is not responsible at all'.

'No meeting with parents. No communication with the parents out of order. The parents they don't want to help the homework, they don't want to bring the thing we want, for example, pictures'.

'The owner doesn't care about the needs of the parents'.

In a study that focused on early childhood teacher educators and managers, concerns about communication concentrated on not establishing effective contact with parents (Chever-Kalburan 2014; Cumming 2015). An ECD cannot be separated from families. Leadership should focus on decision-making rather than on delivering decisions that have already been made (Alameen et al. 2015). Participants in this study indicated that regular meetings with parents should be arranged, as continuous communication with parents could be a solution to negative attitudes of parents towards teachers and managers. According to Alameen (2015), communication is essential to motivate and influence people to contribute to the objectives of an organization of which parents are also members. Chever-Kalburan (2014) also states that parent-teacher communication has an influence on learners' positive attitudes towards school and that it helps parents to develop self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Communication with ECD Practitioners

The participants revealed that managers did not communicate with them on a regular basis. Most of the practitioners said that managers do not have good communication skills and therefore they avoided regular meetings with staff.

Supporting Quotes

'No communication between the owner and the teacher. No regular staff meeting'.

'Teachers cannot communicate with the owner. The owner is not responsible'.

'She has no communication with the staff'.

'Principal said I must create everything on my own'.

'When you ask for poster she make a fool on you by saying look for it'.

Cevher-Kalburhan (2014) posits that a school culture is crafted by learners, teachers and school managers. In order to achieve the goals of a school, interaction between these elements is essential. A principal cannot work in remoteness. It must be clear what the ECD center's vision and ethos are and everybody must work together towards achieving these. In order to create a professional learning community, relationships between members of the staff, including the manager, must be built. Such relationships should involve a culture of trust and risk-taking (Kadji-Beltran et al. 2013). Individuals must be encouraged to contribute ideas and share examples of good practice.

Leaders must develop, implement and sustain a community that is committed to a common purpose with common goals and outcomes (Cevher-Kkalburan 2014). An enhanced culture and climate in which learners can experience early childhood development will expand learner growth and performance. It can be argued that everything happens within the context of a community. Therefore, a purposeful teaching and learning community should be created to deal with the challenges and opportunities of increasing learner growth and achievement.

Motivating Staff

The practitioners argued that the managers did not exert motivating behavior. The participants also indicated that there was insignificant support or motivation for implementing innovative practices. It further transpired that practitioners were not encouraged to obtain any form of ECD qualifications.

Supporting Quotes

'She does not manage and motivate her team'.

'The principal at my center says my creativity is too much for the kids'.

'I have attended the course. I really like to implement in my center, but the problem is my principal, she crushes everything I do'.

'Since I have been in the course I can do the themes, extraordinary. I do share my work with others...but I have lost my job at the crèche, because I demand too much'.

'The things that she does at the course, they are only things that are right'.

'There is no trained staff'.

Influence exercised by a manager to gain support from employees, is required to achieve a common goal (Aubrey et al. 2013). The data obtained from this research does not support the statement made by Cumming et al. (2015) as well as Rouse and Spradbury (2015), suggesting that practitioners should be supported to gain or improve their qualifications and to be engaged in ongoing professional development. Developing a capable and motivated ECD staff is critical to achieve the goals of the center.

Managers of ECD centers should encourage collaboration and teamwork. Alameen et al. (2015) also argue that that a single person cannot exercise all the leadership required to effectively manage an organization. Therefore, a mutual goal is supported by engaging one person with others in a relationship that leads to motivation, commitment and combined leadership. School development and change is reliant on the managers building trust and instituting a shared vision that creates clarity of purpose and high expectations for learner achievement. Managers should therefore be capable of facilitating the creation of such a shared vision among all the participants or stakeholders in the process of school change (Kadji-Beltran et al. 2013). Fostering the capacity for change also depends on staff motivation and commitment, which is enhanced when leaders encourage trust and confidence. This could only happen when there is clarity and determination about not only what the ECD center should seek to achieve, but also why and how it might be achieved (Cumming 2015; Rouse and Spradbury 2015). Commending and inspiring practitioners are important elements in creating a positive school culture and in retaining a committed team.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of many positive changes in South Africa over the past number of years, concerns about the quality of early childhood development in historically disadvantaged areas remain. There is a critical need for interventions

aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning in numerous ECD centers. In 2014 and 2015 the researchers implemented an intervention project aimed at improving the knowledge and skills of Grade R ECD practitioners. However, due to the fact that the practitioners were faced with numerous challenges at their respective ECD centers, their morale was extremely low. In order to address this hindrance in implementing new knowledge and skills, an intervention program, focusing on innovative practices towards creating conducive teaching and learning environments, was designed.

Throughout the duration of the intervention program a significant degree of coherence and mutual action developed between the researchers and the participants. At the end of the training program the practitioners were more motivated to implement innovative practices, they were more self-confident, they realized that no costly resources were needed to introduce innovative practices, they were ready to take risks, and they acknowledged that they will make mistakes but also understood that this was part of learning and developing. However, due to a lack of management skills of managers of the ECD centers, the practitioners were faced with several obstacles in implementing innovative practices.

Effective managers should enhance their employees' engagement and commitment towards the goals of the organization. Managers of ECD centers should value the dynamic relationships with practitioners and parents. They should motivate practitioners to perform above their own expectations. They should create a school culture and climate conducive to teaching and learning, a sound organizational structure, and committed school teams. They should further manage resources effectively and exercise good communication skills in order to foster positive relationships, as this is essential in providing quality early childhood development.

Through the findings from this research it became evident that managers of ECD centers in townships in the Vaal Triangle region of the Gauteng Province in South Africa were often absent, that they have not been trained to manage an ECD center, that they had limited skills to manage finances, that they did not communicate with parents or with the practitioners, and that they did not motivate practitioners to achieve goals or to improve their qualifications. Manag-

ers do not understand the characteristics of innovation and they do not appreciate new ideas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this research, the following recommendations are made.

Academics should intervene in early childhood development as such involvements have the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. It is necessary that any intervention program should be characterized by a two-way engagement. The community should at no time be used as a means to attain the researchers' goals. Community engagement should rather be based on collective partnerships between the university and the communities that it serves.

Any challenges that hinder the effective implementation of an intervention program should be identified and addressed. Therefore, in the context of this research, managers of ECD centers in townships should be empowered to manage their respective centers effectively. In 2016 a training program aimed at empowering managers of ECD centers in townships to manage their centers effectively, will be developed and implemented. The intervention project aimed at improving the knowledge and skills of Grade E ECD practitioners will then be reinstated.

The researchers hope and believe that the implementation of this program will provide a valuable guideline for managers of ECD centers who would want to attempt some changes in their institution's activities and structures.

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