CHALLENGES IMPEDING THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN SOUTH AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

T.V. Baloyi[1] & **J.C. Makhubele**[2]

[1]Department of Social Work, University of Venda,
Private Bag x 5050, Thohoyandou,
[2]Department of Social Work, University of Limpopo,
Private Bag x 1106, Sovenga,
South Africa
E-mail: themba.baloyi@univen.ac.za

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss, debate, and discourse the stumbling blocks that impede the proper implementation of early childhood development programmes in South Africa. This paper used qualitative methodology. In this study, non-probability sampling was used and, specifically, purposive sampling. The following challenges associated with early childhood development programmes were identified: poor infrastructure; inadequate training of early childhood development educators; and poor financial support, monitoring, and evaluation. The following have been recommended to bolster early childhood development programmes: increase the number of trained early childhood development educators; make sufficient funding available to early childhood development centres; mobilise local funding; adopt various means of strengthening the proper implementation of the early childhood development programmes; and monitor early childhood development services.
Keywords: Early childhood development programmes; infrastructure; funding; skills gap; competency; structural problems.

Introduction

In recent years, early childhood development (ECD) has emerged as a theme in international education dialogue (The World Bank, 2010; Thomas & Thomas, 2009; Martinez, Naudeu & Pereira, 2002; Chikutuma, 2013). In 1989, subsequent to the United Nations adoption of a resolution regarding the rights of children, a more visible drive ECD on the international stage was implemented (Soud, 2009; Hyde & Kabiru, 2003). The Education For All (EFA) World Conference in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, the 2000 World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, and the development of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the United Nations have all led to an escalation in ECD policy development (Myers, 2004; UNESCO, 2005; Soud, 2009; Chikutuma, 2013). According to the National Integrated ECD Policy (2015), ECD programmes refer to programmes that provide one or more forms of daily care, development, and early learning opportunities and support to children from birth until the year before they enter formal school. In spite of these ECD developments mentioned above, under-development, the segregation policies of apartheid, and socio-economic inequalities have created a childhood of adversity for the majority of black

African children, such as inadequate access to health care, education, social services, and quality nutrition. This has undermined the development of young children (Atmore, 2012). In South Africa, the social situation in the early 1990s was characterised by political and social instability, low projected economic growth rates, and the population's rising expectations that a new government would meet the significant backlog of basic needs (Patel, 2005). The unprecedented opportunities for all children, occasioned by the end of apartheid, resulted in these children growing up with dignity and equality (Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education, 2001). Since 1994, various legislation, policies, and programmes have been developed to address children's needs (National Integrated Plan for ECD in South Africa 2005–2010). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 - the Bill of Rights, guarantees that all children under the age of 18 years will enjoy equal rights, inter alia, to life dignity access to information citizenship, a name and nationality, a healthy environment, basic education, family and parental care, nutrition, shelter, basic health care, social services, language, and culture (National Integrated ECD Policy, 2015).

Recognising the need for and the benefits of ECD for nation-building, reconstruction, and development, the first democratically elected government of South Africa committed itself to the provision and expansion of ECD in the White Paper on Education and Training of 1995 and the White Paper for Social Welfare of 1997 (National Integrated Plan for ECD in South Africa 2005–2010). The ECD initiatives have been implemented across different government departments. For instance the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Education (DoE), and the Department of Health (DoH). According to Berry, Jamieson and James (2011) assert that in terms of the Children's Act, the DSD is responsible for providing ECD services for children below school-going age (birth to the four year-old age cohort).

Statement of the problem
During the past decade, there has been increasingly more attention paid to children globally, regionally, and nationally due to the realisation that children are more vulnerable when confronted with poverty, livelihood securities, social ills, and health pandemics (Department of Women, Children & People with Disabilities, 2012). In South Africa, ECD is an integral part of addressing the legacy of apartheid education policies and programmes, and indirectly, poverty. The South African government has identified the need to increase access to ECD as well as enhance the quality of ECD programmes and services, specifically for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department of Basic Education, Department of Social Development & UNICEF, 2010). Although considerable commitment has been demonstrated by many countries hardest hit by apartheid, under-development, and segregation, the delivery of comprehensive ECD programmes is often hindered by structural problems, which include the methods and delay of payments from the DSD, a reduction in government subsidies, parents who are unable to pay fees at ECD centres, inadequate ECD educator training, the skills gap, infrastructure problems, and inadequate knowledge required to care for children. Therefore, these researchers considered it necessary to explore the

stumbling blocks impeding the proper implementation ECD programmes in South Africa, in an attempt to provide solutions for the difficult situations faced by ECD centres.

Purpose of the study
The main purpose of this paper is to explore the stumbling blocks that impede the effective implementation of ECD programmes in South Africa, and to explore how inadequate training of ECD educators and an inadequate capacity to monitor ECD centres impede their successful implementation.

Objectives of the study
The objectives that guided the study were:
- To establish how structural problems affect ECD centres' service delivery;
- To identify the impact of infrastructure on the ECD centres' service delivery; and
- To describe the extent to which inadequate financial support affects the ECD programmes.

Methodology
The study adopted qualitative methods. The qualitative method was important to collect the opinion, feelings, attitudes and views of the participants to make meaning of their perceptions (Rubin and Babbie, 2008). The present paper used the exploratory method to encourage debates and discourse on the stumbling blocks that impede proper implementation of ECD programmes in South Africa. In this study, non-probability sampling was used and, specifically, purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, the investigator uses their judgement and prior knowledge to choose for their sample people who best serve the purposes of the study (Monette, Sillivan, Dejong, & Hilton, 2014). The participants were ECD educators/practitioners and beneficiaries from different ECD centres in four different local municipalities of Vhembe District. Focus group interview was used as method of collecting data. In this study data was analysed using thematic analysis where by the data was well-organized into themes according to the views and perceptions of the participants.

Conceptual framework

Ecosystems Theory
In this paper, the researchers adopted the ecosystems theory, also known as the person-in-environment perspective as it helps people to address problems, needs, and aspirations associated with three social dimensions, namely life transitions, the environment, and obstacles that impede the successful accomplishment of transitional and environmental tasks (Compton, Galaway & Cournoyer, 2005). This theory asserts that change efforts should be directed towards reducing personal or environmental demands, increasing environmental support, and strengthening individuals' coping abilities. This theory is used to promote the understanding that ECD programmes, if not well supported both through training and funding, won't be implemented properly.

According to this theory, people experience problems when there is a poor fit between their needs and wants and the resources available to them (Compton et al., 2005).
The ecosystems theory considers the interrelatedness between the community and their environment (Weyers, 2011), and it explains the nature of social problems, such as the absence of an adaptive fit between the two. Therefore, this theory is relevant to explore and describe the impediments of ECD programmes and the environmental systems with which they interact. The ecosystems theory provides a conceptual lens through which human behaviour and social structures can be viewed and analysed concurrently. It is made up of the ecological theory and systems theories, which are known as person-in-environment approaches (Weyers, 2011). The ecosystem perspective in social work embodies a balanced emphasis on the person and the environment. Social workers tend to adopt multilevel system perspectives in an attempt to appreciate and understand people in their environmental context (Compton et al., 2005). The relationship between the person in environment (PIE) is valuable in social work. According to Shackleton, Shackleton, and Gambiza, (2008), a programme that combines the multiple objectives of ecosystem restoration, resource conservation, job creation, skills development, and poverty alleviation, and which has 'taken off' in South Africa and might provide an important example for other countries in the region is the Expanded Public Work programme. The social workers employed by the DSD are the change agents in the ECD programmes and they understand that environmental management is a critical component of poverty alleviation strategies. In support of the above, Weyers (2011) asserts that The Expanded Public Work programme's "primary purpose is to change the conditions within which people live in order to, basically, improve their overall standards of living and quality of life". It is of paramount importance for researchers to understand the ECD educators' environmental concerns and their abilities within the ECD centres

Results and discussion of the study
The main findings of the study include the perceptions of the participants about the stumbling blocks that impedes the proper implementation of early childhood development programmes.

Theme 1. The Early Childhood Development Centres' Structural Problems
The primary concerns raised by the participants was the ECD structural problems. In this paper, the structural problems includes the DSD's payment methods and delays, government subsidy reductions, and parents' inability to pay ECD centres' fees. Participants said that every year food prices escalate while the government subsidies remain the same.
"*We have been receiving an amount of R15 per child for the past 3 years*"
"*In our ECD facility parents sometimes pay for their children very late…and some doesn't even pay which create a very serious problem*"
It was also identified that at times the Department of Social Development delays payments, making it difficult for ECD centres to cater for the children in their care.

Furthermore, some parents don't pay fees at the ECD centres, creating further economic challenges in the centres.

Theme 2: Infrastructure and adequate systems for implementation

The study establish that in general, there are vast infrastructural differences in the ECD facilities and geographical location. Infrastructure in ECDs is a particular problem in the South African context, and is often framed as the biggest challenge to ECD provisioning in the country (HSRC, 2010). Many ECD facilities function without basic infrastructure such as running water, access to electricity, or suitable sanitation.

"Our ECD centre doesn't have building, shortages of swings and toilet facilities that accommodate all children as required by the Department Social Development"

The lack of resources was identified as the main stumbling blocks towards the proper implementation of the ECD programme in Vhembe District. Participants said the following

"*Lack of resources makes it difficult for us to provides proper and quality ECD services and also sustain good quality programmes at the centres*"

A study conducted by UNICEF, DSD, DoE, and the National Treasury (2011) established that several ECD facilities have limited space and poor infrastructure, they receive inadequate community support, there experience issues regarding adequacy of nutrition, and only a few facilities put sufficient effort into developing children. Secondly, the study established that the unregistered facilities had a significant amount of buildings that were rated as being "in a bad or very bad condition" (Department of Basic Education, DSD & UNICEF, 2011).

During the discussion with the participants it was raised that ECD centres doesn't not get registration with the DSD because of poor building. According to the ECD National Audit Report of 2014, infrastructure was cited as the main factor that restricted ECD centres from registering with the DSD (DSD, 2014). The National Department of Basic Education provides physical space for Grade R classes at public primary schools. The DSD, the Public Works Department, and various municipalities have provided buildings for ECD centres, but these provisions are on an ad-hoc basis and do not form part of any government programme (Atmore, 2012). It is mostly non-profit organisations (NPOs) and donors that provide funds for infrastructure development and upgrading at ECD centres.

"*We were funded by the National lottery board to build the class rooms for the children... Government never gave us funds for building but for food only*"

 According to Atmore (2012), the National Development Agency can support the ECD sector by providing minor and major infrastructure upgrades to ECD centres, depending on the needs identified, following an ECD centre's needs assessment. Although the government has made commendable progress in formulating integrated ECD policy approaches, the implementation of inter-sectoral programmes remains a challenge (Department of Education, 2001), still the quality of services remains poor due to lack of resources, poor infrastructure, and the lack of qualified ECD practitioners.

Theme 3: Inadequate Training of Early Childhood Development Educators

The ECD educators who work within the ECD programmes are expected to be competent in their work. The knowledge, skills, and practices of ECD educators are important factors in determining how much a young child learns and how prepared that child is for entry into primary school (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009). However, with the current mushrooming of ECD programmes, particularly in rural areas, the issue of competency is neglected by both authorities and ECD practitioners. Participants had to say the following;

"*When I started the ECD centre I was not having any basic training from the government .I only had the Godly given skills for taking care of the children but now I attended several training even though more training is needed to me*"

According to Atmore (2012), quality teaching and learning is essential for effective early development to take place. According to the DSD and UNICEF (2006), all practitioners must be trained and must receive ongoing training in ECD and the management of programmes and facilities for young children. Atmore (2012) shares a similar sentiment, and asserts that in order to produce quality ECD teachers, various training and education opportunities should be made available through short skills programmes, and via comprehensive ECD qualifications. One participant indicated that she still need more training. There were three principals of the ECD centres who indicated that they have level 1 to 4 ECD qualifications which is the basic foundation of the early childhood development. The participants felt strongly that the training of the ECD practitioner should be aligned with specific conditions of ECD practice. In other words management of the ECD centre should also receive management training courses. The following accredited programmes (FET ECD level 4 and National Diploma in ECD level 5) aim to equip ECD practitioners with the skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes necessary to provide quality education and care for young children, to upgrade standards of ECD programmes and practice, and to facilitate the establishment of active child-centred learning environments (DoE, 2001).

Theme 4: Financial Support

Government funding for ECD programmes (0 – 4) has traditionally been provided through service-level agreements with the NGO sector or through direct department budgets for core services, such as monitoring and evaluation of service providers(September,2007). The participants had to say the following;

"*Government actually fund us for a period of three years. We have to ensure that we go all out and ask for funding in various companies such as Eskom, Lotto as well as mining company when call is out for us to apply*"

The South African government has reiterated its commitment to implement social development programmes that are considerate of the needs of children. These programmes are coordinated through an inter-departmental committee comprising the Departments of Basic Education, Health, and Social Development (Department of Basic Education, 2001). Participant indicated the following;

"*I'm happy that Department of Education also play their role and organise service providers to train us and encourages All of us to attend their training in order to equip*

our skills and nurse from the local clinic send home based carers to immunise our children when need arise"

The DSD is largely responsible for funding the ECD programme and monitoring service providers that render welfare services (Policy on Financial Awards to Service Providers, 2004). There are two primary ways in which the DSD in each province provides funding to ECDs. The first channel of funding is through a subsidy for registered ECD facilities, calculated at R12 per child per day (but varying by province, in some instances) for those children from birth to 4 years of age (some provinces have increased this to R15 per child per day (Atmore, 2012). Secondly, the department provides funding for ECDs through NPOs' funding programmes for various ECD programmes. These programmes are usually non-centre-based models of ECD provisioning, such as family outreach programmes (Atmore, 2012). Participants also mentioned that;

"*Government funds is very little, we can't even support our children. I wish this democratically elected government can provide more money for us to survive*"

Lack of funding is another factor that affects the delivery of quality Early Child Care Education services. In addition to the lack of government subsidies for some of the informal ECD centres, funds for the ECD services in under-resourced settings lack government support, and are inadequate to meet the qualification standards for ECD centre registration. As a result, most ECD centres operate under informal means (Mbarathi, Mthembu & Diga, 2016).

"*We don't have any other funders in our centre which we can really on except the government funds. I suggest that when funds are provided to us, our government need to check through DSD if the centre have other financial support and if not they must add more funds to that particular ECD centre*"

The majority of participants indicated that they don't have adequate financial support in their ECD centre which make it difficult for them to provide quality services to the children.

Theme 5: Inadequate Capacity to Monitor Early Childhood Development Programmes

ECD centres must be monitored by a social worker or other official employed and authorised by the provincial DSD for two years (DSD & UNICEF, 2006). The participants said the following;

"*Local social workers visit our centres but the treatment we get from them is very bad. They treat us as if the DSD give us a lot of money*"

Participants also felt that these social workers undermine them and the work they do to the children. They also indicated that sometimes social worker doesn't know what they are doing. They require a lot of things to them. ECD programmes are assessed at the time of first registration, and assessments should take place every two years (Berry, Jamieson & James, 2011). However, contrary to DSD policy, the DSD needs to be capacitated to monitor the ECD programmes on at least an annual basis to ensure the smooth running of the programmes.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Based on the above findings from the collected data, the research concluded that ECD centre have stumbling blocks that need to be attended to. The following recommendations are made.

Adequate Infrastructure

In South Africa, the availability of financial resources are important components to ensure a successful ECD programme and to improve the conditions in all ECD facilities. An ECD's infrastructure includes the building, grounds, learning equipment, and learning materials (Atmore, 2012). The government needs to ensure that sufficient infrastructure budget is allocated to the responsible departments. The main reason why many of these facilities are unregistered is directly related to the fact that they cannot meet the infrastructure requirements necessary for registration (Department of Basic Education, DSD & UNICEF, 2011, Atmore, 2012). The National Department of Social Development (NDSD) established a national integrated ECD infrastructure grant in collaboration with National Treasury designed for national delivery of ECD infrastructure (National Integrated ECD policy, 2015:98). To this end, the NDSD needs to ensure that ECDs in rural areas also have sufficient, hygienic, and safe environments. An integrated infrastructure policy is also needed to address the privately-run and non-governmental organisation (NGO) -led centres, and practitioner training would be required (Malgas, 2013).

Increase Early Childhood Development Educators' Training

The government should undertake a bigger role in ECD programme provision, by ensuring that ECD educators have all the necessary available quality of care, skills, knowledge, and support they need for effective implementation of the ECD programmes. In order to produce quality ECD educators and better ECD service delivery, the practitioners from both registered ECD centres and non-registered ECD centres should be trained. The education opportunities should be made available through short skills programmes, and through full diploma ECD qualifications. To guarantee quality care and teaching the practitioners' training should include practical demonstrations and instruction during training and on-site support to assist with implementation of theoretical training, and there must be follow-up support after the completion of training provided by government authorities to ensure consistent implementation.

Providing Sufficient Funding

The South African government has invested significantly in ECD during the last few years, and enrolment in ECD programmes has increased rapidly. Government support for ECD has taken two main forms:
(i) The expansion of Grade R mainly in public schools, funded by the DoE; and
(ii) DSD's subsidies to private community-based ECD facilities mainly serving children too young for Grade R (UNICEF, DSD & DoE, 2011).

According to the National Integrated ECD Policy (2015), adequate funding for staffing and per-child programme support for early learning play groups and programmes will be paid through an increased budget allocation to the DSD. There are many factors affecting ECD funding from these government departments, the most notable being that the DoE and the DSD are under no obligation to fund ECD services (Atmore ,2012); the government needs to ensure that there are adequate funds for ECD programme.

Mobilising Local Funding
The South African government should encourage and mobilise local business communities and the general public to raise funds to support the proper implementation of ECD programmes, because donors have been exhausted with developing countries' propensity of continued expectation of assistance (Kang'ethe, & Mangwiro 2015). The business sector, in partnership with the government, has a duty to help ECD programmes initiate their own income-generating projects that will enable them to be financially sustainable. Projects such as "poultry-keeping and nutritional/herbal gardens" are perceived as generating the highest income and being the most reliable micro enterprises, but these projects are also perceived as the most labour intensive (Mutenje, Nyakudya, Katsinde & Chikuvire, 2007). These researchers contend that people should not be consistently dependent upon donors or the government for assistance (Kang'ethe,& Mangwiro, 2015). Perhaps what communities need is local leadership that will drive mobilisation strategies to raise funds for ECD programmes.

Conclusions
ECD has become a priority sector in South Africa, particularly in respect to ensuring equity and high quality of care for the youngest members (birth to five year-olds) of the population. However, many stumbling blocks impact the processes of achieving strong and successful ECD services. Poor infrastructure, inadequate financial support, inadequate ECD educator training, and poor monitoring by government officials are areas that need to be addressed. This will result in ECD programmes in South Africa being effectively and efficiently run. Thus, it is critical to ensure that government, private organisations, NPOs, and local community businesses collaborate and help ECD programmes initiate income-generating projects that will strengthen their sustainability.

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