

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**ON**

**CREATING SUCCESSFUL EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD)**

**LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

**SEPTEMBER 2016**

**1. Introduction**

The Early Childhood Development sector in South Africa has seen numerous efforts from government to restructure and put into place policies and structures to correct past imbalances within the ECD sector. Learning begins at the very early stages of our lives, early childhood is one of the most vital stages because it is where we develop future characteristics, values, beliefs and morals as adults and which are influenced by the environment in which we experience during our early childhood years. Therefore, it is important to create environments that will foster quality learning and encourage good behaviour and way of life.

**2. The importance of Early Years**

It is within the early years of childhood where children's brain development is more complex and works faster. It is this period that is most fundamental for human development and where significant foundations need to be defined and established to promote and support learning and growth for the benefit of later years (Christina, R, 2011). Children grow faster physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and morally from birth to seven years. During these years they acquire concepts, skills, attitudes that lay the foundation for lifelong learning. It is also in this period that they learn language, gain motor skills essential for learning how to read and write, learn basic numerical concepts and skills, problem solving skills, establish a desire for learning and maintaining relationships (Department of Social Development, 2006).

### **3. ECD Environment**

#### **3.1 ECD learning environment**

Early childhood development centres also referred to as pre-schools or kindergartens have become increasingly a common place for young children to spend their day at. Children at most spend about 12.500 hours at ECD centres therefore the design of these facilities cannot be taken for granted. Since children spend so many hours at ECD centres, it is essential to ensure that learner's needs are taken into consideration such as their age, ability and learning method and differences when planning for learning experiences (Anthieta, 2005). These centres should be designed, structured and maintained properly to ensure that activities done at the centres are of a high quality and also be able to promote quality learning. It is important to take into consideration that children are extremely sensitive to space as research shows that children remember places much better than they would remember people and things so as a result designing of ECD centres should be well planned. Well structured and designed ECD centres provide the right kind of space for children to create imaginations, activities and access educational opportunities (Shaw, 2010).

#### **3.3 impact of learning environment on children**

The learning environment can be of great influence to children, it can affect them positively or negatively. Children are vulnerable and easily influenced by their own surrounding, thus the environment they are place can affect them. The physical setting of the ECD centres have great influence on children's behaviour and also influence how they act or respond to things. The indoor / outdoor setting and materials provided within the centre determines where children focus their attention (Anthieta, 2005) moreover because children learn by exploring and investigating their surroundings. As a result, the environment should be set up in a way that children will find exciting and also make available the right resources for children to play and learn with (Isbell & Exelby, 2001).

Places where children are taught and cared for should also be conducive and the environment should be able to stimulate learners but more importantly teachers

should be equipped with the relevant training and skills in order to facilitate quality learning and to develop their learners (Vaughan, 2007). These environments need not only provide great opportunities for children to learn but they must also be safe.

In Labuschagne's thesis (2015) he points out that particularly in South Africa ECD provision in rural areas is more partial in relation to quality and quantity compared to those in urban areas. Children from rural areas are most in need for good quality ECD services to assist in developing their best potential. Therefore, rural area based ECD centres provide minimal age appropriate and beneficial programmes towards developing a preschool child. Some of the reasons contributing to these challenges are that practitioners have no prior training or any formal training and qualifications to aid them in providing quality education. Moreover, because ECD practitioners are also not required to register with the South African Council of Educators and there are no available accreditation systems for practitioners (SA, 2001b; Biersteker & Dawes, 2008).

On the other hand, teaching aids in rural areas are usually limited and some practitioners are not at all trained on how to effectively use them. The environments in which the ECDs are located or operated from are usually not up to standard, both indoor and outdoor environments. In order to ensure effective learning at ECD centres, there needs to be a suitable learning environment and training of practitioners (Labuschagne, 2015). With all these challenges faced within the ECD sector, it is comforting to know that South Africa is considered one of the largest and a powerful country in the Southern Africa to promote ECD. It has also established good legislations on provision of and addressing issues related to ECD.

As highlighted in some of the paragraphs above, the environment where the ECD centre is operated plays a significant role in quality of teaching and stimulation of children. The learning environment should have necessary materials to stimulate and provide adequate learning for children (Vaughan, 2007). Essentially, teachers should possess the necessary required skills and training in order to effectively provide and facilitate learning in a quality learning environment (Labuschagne, 2015).

### 3.3 How to create successful learning environments

The learning environment is an essential and a great learning tool, the work of an ECD teacher is pre-done before children can even enter the classroom. When an environment is set up with knowledge of how it can develop and teach children then the environment can actively support learning and teaching. In cases where a teacher struggles with children's behaviour they should evaluate their own classroom setup / arrangement, daily schedules, materials used in the classroom and the curriculum for teaching (Barresi, YEAR).

There are certain best practices that ECD practitioners can follow in creating the best learning environment at the centre. The following are some of the best practices that can be followed:

- Setting up the classroom with learning materials that will encourage children to explore
- Make use of relevant learning materials that speak to children's own life experiences, they should be open ended but purposeful
- The environment should provide opportunities for choices
- Plan learning experiences in a teacher-initiated and child-initiated to create opportunities for children to acquire new skills in small groups

Schedules should include various forms of learning such as quiet learning activities, active learning activities, small and large groups, indoor and outdoor activities (Barresi, YEAR)

Labuschagne (2015) highlights that ECD centres should to provide quality indoor and outdoor learning environments. The indoor environment should have necessary objects / equipment's and should also be arranged in a way that will influence good behaviour on children. Teachers are responsible for developing the language in the classroom therefore it is crucial that they understand the "language" that is being created (Pairman & Terreni, 2001). An ECD practitioner should include the following six play experiences when planning for a learning environment:

- a) quiet and calm form of play
- b) play using structured materials
- c) play that is inclusive of gross motor activities

- d) use of creative materials for discovery play
- e) dramatic play
- f) a conducive environment for disabled children to play in

To ensure the safety of children within the indoor environment, practitioners should make sure that electrical cords are covered if there are any, have a fire extinguisher in a classroom, a map showing exit doors in case of emergencies, practitioners should also have training on first aid and be aware of their learner's allergens (Labuschangne, 2015).

#### **4. Challenges within the ECD sector**

The South African Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development highlights that in poor communities very few infants and children are catered for in ECD centres and even fewer receive appropriate ECD services and learning programmes. As a result children have a rushed and no prior learning before they are introduced to formal school learning. Poor access to ECD programmes for children together with poor facilities and inadequate learning conditions contributes to poor learning, school failure, and repetition of grades and high rates of drop-out in later learning. This situation is intensified by inadequate funding of ECD services and discriminatory funding by previous education departments.

Lack of funding of ECD services to black communities has negatively impacted on the provision of ECD services in these communities. Some of the underlying issues caused by the lack of funding are:

- Lack of financial resources for practitioner's salaries
- De-motivation of ECD practitioners
- Large numbers of non-formally trained ECD practitioners
- Non-recognition of practitioner's non-formal qualifications causes low morale
- ECD services are provided in multipurpose halls and informal structures
- Regulations relating to norms and standards and physical requirements for facilities and state-recognised qualifications for practitioners makes it difficult for the ECD centres in poor communities to access subsidies (SA Interim policy for ECD)

## **5. Outcomes of the ECD Audit**

In relation to ECD programming the ECD audit found that most centres use their own curricula, ECD centres do not use the same curricula or same method of teaching which is more likely to affect the quality of the programme and skill development intended. Many centres were found to claim using or following National Early Learning and Development Standards for Children Birth to Four Years (NELDS), however it was unclear as to which specific aspects are being used in their programmes. The audit could not quite establish which centres follow a quality curriculum due to the variety of programmes within the centres. The audit could also not assess and evaluate the quality of the curriculum due to the lack of training and qualifications from the practitioners. The audit therefore suggests that further investigation is required to assess the quality of ECD education throughout South Africa due to the high variances in the curricula, lack of qualifications and training of practitioners and many ECD centres that are not registered and approved (ECD Audit).

Some of the registered ECD centres do not perform any kind of assessments to determine learning outcomes and others perform more formal assessments that daily assessment will not be able to show. These vary across provinces and thus creating a need for more national guidelines to assess and evaluate how well children are learning in these centres.

The audit findings recommendations state that provision of ECD programmes should have common objectives to promote the best interest of young children. In order to achieve this, the ECD centre should be a safe environment with the ability to promote holistic development such as physical, emotional, intellectual, language, values and so on and also allow children to learn through play. The programme activities and learning should be well planned to achieve set objectives. Ensure child centred teaching and that addresses children's needs. Programmes should also be able to prepare children for formal schooling by laying strong foundations for lifelong learning and development (ECD Audit).

The health and safety of children at ECD centres is of outmost importance and children need to be cared for in a safe environment. Some ECD centres maintains

and keep records of immunisation records although it is unclear how ECD centres keep those records up to date as children can be immunised with the knowledge of the ECD centre. About a quarter of ECD centres do not keep immunisation records and this shows the lack of compliance. Potential solutions include an information campaign or allow for more information to be more easily shared between local clinics and ECD centres possibly through confidentiality waivers signed by parents/guardians upon enrolment (ECD Audit)

## **7. Legislative Framework**

### a) National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that ECD services are available to every child and that there is equitable access. To also create organisational and institutional arrangements that will be able to plan, implement, lead, coordinate and monitor the provision and support of ECD services. Create a monitoring, quality assurance and improvement systems to secure provision of quality early childhood development services and outcomes for young children in South Africa (Unicef, 2015).

This policy recognises that early learning and development in children's early years is fundamental to build lifelong learning and to contribute to the success of key outcomes for infants and young children. Policy states that government has a role in regulating and funding ECD programmes that are provided by the non-government or non-profit sector. Although financial support and subsidies over the 2014/15 financial year have been received by a large number of children in ECD centres the challenge remains that early learning and care programmes are not equitable or universally available to vulnerable children and more over to disabled children.

The poorest of children do not have equitable access to early childhood development programmes and those who cannot afford to pay ECD fees are also excluded from these programmes. In poor communities, ECD centres are not up to good standards and cannot provide quality learning programmes for children.

## **8. Conclusion**

As seen from this literature review, creating quality learning environments can contribute to quality lifelong learning for children since children are easily influenced by environments they live in. Early Childhood Development will remain the most essential investment in the education system. In order to produce quality learners and students, the investment should start in their early years. There is still more to be done within the ECD sector with regards to supporting poor communities in setting up ECD centres that are up to standard and training practitioners to be able to offer quality learning and ECD services.



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