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Supporting Culturally Diverse Early Childhood Centres in South African Townships

Abstract

This paper explores how early childhood (EC) leaders in South Africa support the EC centres in the townships of Gauteng Province. The term township refers to underdeveloped and racially segregated urban areas reserved for black communities, specifically Coloured, Africans and Indians. The townships are usually built outside the cities and towns. The term (township) also has a discrete legal implication in South Africa's system of land title, which carries no tribal connotations.

Gauteng Province is one of the nine provinces of South Africa. It is the economic hub of the country and consists of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The purpose of this paper is to understand the support practices by EC leaders through providing insight into the subjective experiences of practitioners. In this paper, support means empowering practitioners. This paper followed the qualitative approach in exploring how EC leaders support practitioners in a diverse cultural milieu. The paradigm used is interpretive because the author interpreted the support mechanisms offered. Data was collected through literature review. The paper contends that knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures is significance in giving support to culturally diverse EC centres. The expectation is that EC leaders should have the skill and ability to support practitioners in any given context. Findings reveal that good support can happen when there is collaboration between principals, practitioners and communities.

Keywords: cultural diversity, township, support, practitioners, EC centre, leadership, race

Introduction

South Africa (SA) is a multicultural society evolving from a segregated past where diversity was never tolerated, let alone celebrated. The dawn of democracy in South Africa only began in 1993 as an interim constitution drafted by various political formations, and had its first democratic elections in 1994 (South African History Online, 2017). Before then, SA was marked by anti-colonial wars and the struggle against the apartheid system where their designated racial group determined a person's place in society. Subsequently according to the South African History Online (2016), the education system, was designed around the policy and brought into law by the Bantu Education Act of 1953.

This Act was commitment by the apartheid government to keep the education system of black South Africans separate and inferior to that of white South Africans. One of the most significant points in the struggle against apartheid was the rejection of Bantu Education by the youth of SA through a series of uprisings culminating into mass protest action on June 16, 1976. Since the first democratic general election in 1994, the nation has been transitioning from a largely rural society to an urban one. Thousands of people leave the former Bantustans and homelands, set up by the

apartheid regime, in search of a better life in SA's urban centres with Gauteng Province being the largest as the country's economic hub.

Gauteng Province experiences a constant influx of people from its surrounding provinces and immigrants from various African countries and the world. A large number of people from both local and international migrant families have their children enrolled in EC centres and schools across the province. Early childhood development practitioners have to work with children and families from a range of diverse backgrounds, which can prove to be a daunting and challenging task. However, at the heart of these EC centres are the practitioners who need to be supported and skilled to function in a culturally diverse context.

Often times the lives that migrant families leave behind at home are difficult, but many still struggle to find life in the city any easier (Barbarin & Ritcher, 2001, p. 15). Looking into the future, changes in the social fabric of South African EC centres will require that practitioners and their leaders develop a deeper level of sensitivity to the cultural and linguistic needs of their learners. Gumbo (2001, p. 233) argues that a learner's development may be negatively affected if cultural habits are not concurrently developed with other areas of their learning. In order for EC leaders to provide effective support to practitioners, enabling them to operate effectively in these culturally diverse classrooms, their attitude, knowledge base and cultural intelligence is crucial. Cultural diversity and inclusion need to be considered when institutions are re-curriculating.

Background and status of early childhood in South Africa

It is compulsory that by age seven, every child should be at school as required by the South African education system. Children under the age of seven are supposed to be registered in a pre-school or a day care centre. One of the South African Government's goals is to make early childhood education accessible to all South African children. There are two EC structures in SA. One structure regulated by the province and sponsored by the government and the other is autonomous and run by private bodies or communities. Both the government and private structures comprise of Pre-Grade R and Grade R programs (Reception Year) as the two main constituents. The programmes in Pre-Grade R are designed for children between 0-4 years of age, and Grade R programs are appropriate for 5-6 year-olds. The most commonly used term for EC in SA is early childhood development (ECD). In this paper, the author will use the term early childhood (EC). The Department of Education (DoE) defines ECD as 'an umbrella term that applies to the processes of child development from birth to nine years of age. It summarises the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, moral and social development of the child' (Department of Education, 2001, p. 9).

Currently the accountability for EC in SA is spread across three government departments, that is: the Department of Social Development (DSD), Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the Department of Health (DoH). The three departmental governments collaborate with different responsibilities such as children's social, health and education issues towards the achievement of quality practices and services in the EC sector. Storkbeck and Moodley (2011) highlight the lack of cohesion between the DSD, DBE and DoH as regards to the age categories to be included in the term 'EC'. However, there is a common acknowledgement of

how important the holistic development of the children is, in all areas. In his recent State of the Nation's Address (SoNA), President Cyril Ramaphosa pointed out the government's intent to transfer the EC responsibility from the DSD to that of DBE and introduce a second year of compulsory early learning before school.

These intermediations should be capacitated to provide the level of support required to implement a province-wide strategy for EC as envisaged in Section 93 of the Children's Act. Optimal development of children requires skilled and well-supported caregivers and practitioners. In other words, collaboration with all the stakeholders is important. Even though the responsibility of EC will be migrated to the Department of Basic Education as the department responsible for curriculum issues, there would still be a need for synergy between the three governmental departments. More support and training will also be required. Modise (2017, p. 19) defines support in the context of this paper as a technique afforded practitioners by relevant stakeholders to make teaching and learning in EC classes effective.

The context of early childhood centres in the townships

Since the birth of democracy in South Africa (SA), the country saw the rise in the establishment of EC centres. In SA, EC centres are business opportunities for unemployed mothers and grannies. Most of the centres in the townships operate without proper documentation. Some centres have registered with the DSD and the DBE. Most practitioners in both registered and unregistered EC centres do not have appropriate qualifications. However, currently there had been a slight shift in the status quo. The Department of Education has provided bursaries to some pre grade one (Grade R) practitioners based in both communities and schools to obtain a three-year qualification. This still leaves a huge gap of untrained Grade R practitioners including the practitioners in the birth to four-year olds category. This poses a challenge in the EC sector and compromises the provision of high quality practices. The problem remains because the majority of EC leaders are centre owners and of older ages and lack EC qualifications. They are not that keen to advance themselves further academically as they have concluded that they are old. This creates a challenge because EC practitioners need regular support from their centre leaders, more so because they do not possess any formal training and function in diverse and multicultural environments. According to Modise (2017, p. 2), there is no proper support for EC practitioners from the supervisors being their leaders. EC practitioners in Gauteng are said to be functioning alone with no support from the leaders especially the Grade R practitioners (Modise, 2017, p. 3).

Besides trainings that practitioners may receive from Non-Government Organisations (NGO), they also require more intense support on a daily basis on how to function in multicultural classrooms. The EC centres in SA are dealing with migrant children who come from different cultural and social backgrounds. The 2006 National Child Care Strategy has to provide guidance to ensure shared commitment from the EC teachers' team towards anti-discrimination practices. Although SA has 11 official languages, practitioners still are confronted with the realities of understanding and communicating with learners of diverse languages in class. Majority of EC centres in townships are under resourced and over-crowding is on high with un-favourable learner/teacher ratio.

Dynamics of migration in South Africa

Immigration from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries has shaped largely by a history of labour migration during the apartheid era. This is part of SA's history and cannot be erased or omitted in the narrations of SA's history and background. As a result, schools and EC centres in SA have become more diverse in terms of social, racial, linguistic, cultural, religious make up over the past 23 years. There are also practitioners and parents from diverse cultural backgrounds that the EC leaders have to consider when planning programmes. EC services need to be more sensitive to the cultural and linguistic needs of migrant children. Practitioners who are directly involved need support from their centre leaders and parents as well. EC leaders, according to the National Child Care Strategy (2006, p. 21), are required to provide guidance and support to ensure shared commitment from the EC practitioners towards *anti-discrimination practices*.

Defining culturally diverse context

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), culture is 'the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time'. Each EC center is an institute with its own values, beliefs, ethos and practices. It is imperative that each structure of the South African EC system embraces diversity as a core value, from the government department right down to the individual centers. SA was founded on the very principles of diversity and inclusion. 'We the People of South Africa believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity' (Constitutional Assembly, 1996). Leaders need to be knowledgeable and skilled in leading and managing in a culturally diverse context because EC centres enroll learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is especially true for EC centres in the Gauteng province. SA will not get away with this kind of status quo. Nigrini (2016, p. 6) is of the opinion that cultural diversity is important as one of the main factors that lead to curriculum changes in the democratic SA. SA itself is naturally a culturally diverse country. South Africa, and indeed Gauteng, is a key destination for people from neighbouring provinces and countries seeking employment opportunities.

Theoretical framework

This desktop research is based on Vygotsky's model of mediated learning. According to Sills, Rowse and Emerson (2016), Vygotsky's argument is that the child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) determines the difference between what children could achieve independently and what they could achieve through collaboration with more able partners. Putting this into the context of this paper, it simply means that, the EC practitioners' level of understanding and knowledge will determine what they themselves could achieve when working in isolation without support of their leaders and when they receive support from their leaders. Since these practitioners are not professionally qualified their interaction with the diverse nature of their learners might be flawed and not promote effective and inclusive teaching. The situation might be different if there is collaboration with the leadership through supervision and support of their practices.

Implications of supporting practitioners in culturally diverse EC centres

For EC leadership, it is expected of EC leaders to endeavor to provide services of the highest quality in all aspects of their offering. They are to offer the necessary support to their subordinates, create the conditions conducive for making sure that procedures and policies needed to address diversity and equality issues effectively in EC centres are implemented. Leaders are to make sure that diversity challenges encountered by learners, teachers and parents are addressed. Programmes and curriculum offered should seek to address issues holistically. There need to be collective planning to achieve the centre's goals. Ethical considerations and cultural diversity issues need to be taken into consideration.

For EC practitioners, there will be improved practitioner performance. Building practitioners' confidence in interacting with diverse learners in the classroom, preparations will take into consideration diverse cultural backgrounds of learners; discrimination of learners based on their cultural background will be minimised; and mutual understanding between children's parents and the EC centers.

For EC children, they will be accepted as they are and their learning be planned accordingly to meet their individual needs. They will not feel inferior about who they are and accept each other.

Recommendations

The quality of leadership in EC centres is critical to creating an environment that is conducive to fostering diversity. In her article 'Managing workforce diversity in South African schools', Rita Niemann (2006) highlights the principles below that leaders could use as guidelines to leading in the culturally diverse classrooms and staff environment:

Self-evaluation – EC leaders are to confront the stereotypes, ethnic and cultural prejudices by undertaking to evaluate themselves persistently on a continuous basis (Niemann, 2006, p. 108). Evaluating themselves will help them in recognising their limitations and will seek to fill the gaps they have identified.

Approach – Niemann (2006) emphasises the need for leaders to take a balanced and objective approach to diversity that is as broad as possible without reinforcing traditional biases and stereotypes. Since the practitioners themselves are also from culturally diverse groups, they need support from leaders to work co-operatively with each other and the children's parents to enhance their understanding of diversity in their classrooms to the best interest of the EC children.

Rewarding good work – Rewarding good work is one of the workers' motivations. Leaders, according to Niemann (2006), should involve the whole team of staff including practitioners when instituting the standards for what constitutes satisfactory and exceptional performance (Niemann, 2006, p. 109).

Support – Provision of support requires high level of commitment from the leadership team. Niemann suggests that EC centres should intentionally draft a policy on diversity. Practitioners, as part of the staff, should be allowed to contribute so that they own the policy. Niemann (2006) is of a view that without strong moral and ethical reference points EC centres will be rudderless. Thus allowing many kids to fall through cracks of a system that excludes them.

Empowerment – Diverse people have to work together, and institutions should take care that the tension and conflict resulting from differences does not destroy the harmony and unity an institution seeks to achieve (Niemann, 2006, p. 110).

The leaders may adopt Niemann's principles since they are relevant to EC practices.

Establishing relationship with parents is of key in making sure that there is flourishing support to practitioners operating in diverse cultural environments. Parents will also provide additional support to practitioners' understanding of the diverse nature of their classrooms. Ethical considerations would also play an extensive role.

Conclusion

24 years after democracy, South Africa's EC and education system struggles to undo the damage done by the Bantu education system. To move on from a past that has been characterised by segregation and ethnic conflict, South Africa needs to be equipped to deal with an environment of diversity. This will open up a large pool of ideas from which to draw and imagine the future of education. Through continuous self-evaluation, practitioners will hone the skills necessary to adapt to an environment that is constantly changing. By adopting a balanced and objective approach to leadership, EC leaders can nullify traditional biases. By rewarding good work, leaders establish and reinforce performance standards. When there is a strong commitment from the upper structures of management, a level of integrity is established that will allow each EC centre to achieve its objectives.

When diversity is incorporated into the leadership strategy of the given institution, institutional efficiency is enhanced. By collaborating on a regional level, leaders will be empowered to lead in a diverse context. Collaboration within and across the department will yield a far-reaching impact on the future of education and EC in South Africa. Meier and Hartel (2009) indicate that handling diversity effectively in education, educators (practitioners) need to recognise the rationality of transformations. It requires firstly a reevaluation of personal and institutional philosophies and perceptions, and secondly a frank conviction and commitment to enable and achieve learner diversity. The statements are so true for leaders and practitioners in EC centers.

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