Challenges encountered in maintaining mobile early childhood care and Education centres: Practitioners’ perspectives

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges practitioners face in maintaining mobile Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centers. Ten practitioners from one organization that provides mobile ECCE in the Free State Province, South Africa, participated in this study using a qualitative approach. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data for this study. ATLAS.ti software was used to analyze qualitative data. The findings showed that the language barrier is one of the most significant challenges mobile ECCE programs present. Further, psychosocial challenges, such as the abuse of alcohol by parents and poverty, as well as rain and wind, dust, and cold, are also challenges to practitioners. Therefore, these findings have substantial policy implications for the need for ECCE policy frameworks to mitigate language barriers and psychosocial challenges in mobile ECCE centers by knowing the different home languages of the children.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education Centre; Maintaining Mobile ECCE, Practitioners Challenges
A. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, mobile centres are available for early childhood development. Many South African children have been benefiting from these facilities for a long time. Children between the ages of birth to nine are eligible for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program. Ultimately, this program aims to ensure that children successfully transition from early childhood to primary education. Early childhood development (ECD) programs have been shown to reduce school dropout and repetition rates (Meier et al., 2017). Childhood experiences significantly affect a child’s well-being and learning ability. Every child should have access to high-quality early care and education (ECE) experiences that uplift them and set them up for success in life. Sadly, there are unfair experiences that many minoritized children in ECE have, such as a higher risk of being excluded and a disproportionately low number of opportunities to have their identities validated or recognized (Lang et al., 2024). These early experiences impact children’s development, and ECE teachers’ dispositions, knowledge, and skills (DKSs) significantly shape these experiences (Lang et al., 2024). Studies have shown that language barriers (St. Amant et al., 2018; Yu, 2017; Yu, 2017; Norheim & Moser, 2020) and psychosocial factors (Adams-Gardner, 2018; Huebner et al., 2017; Skinner et al., 2016; Abu Khudair et al., 2024) are challenges to effective implementation of ECE program. Although obtaining a high-quality early childhood education is a global priority, opinions on what constitutes a high-quality education persist (Cohrssen et al., 2023). Differing stakeholder priorities in the Australian context may lead to divergent views on what constitutes excellence (Cohrssen et al., 2023). As a result of the deterioration of ECEC quality in Sweden, legislation was enacted in 2016 that emphasised lesson plans and group size norms for children's development (de la Porte et al., 2022). Globally, Early childhood development (ECD) has received increased high-level support in recent years (Chan, 2023; Black et al., 2017; Britto et al., 2017). Providing early education to children is highly recommended since it benefits schools, children, families, and governments alike (Mncanca & Okeke, 2016). However, there are almost 20,000 under qualified Grade R instructors on duty in South Africa to ensure the continuation of Grade R instruction (Hannaway et al., 2019). Grade R in the South African context is also known as the reception year, which is the year a child spends before Grade 1. In South Africa, it has been found that most fathers or men do not take their children's early education seriously. More research is needed to identify and overcome obstacles that hinder the participation of men at the executive level to increase men's involvement in early childhood education (Firouzan et al., 2019). Moreover, there has been little research on the reasons for low male participation in maternal and fetal health in Iran and the obstacles to it (Firouzan et al., 2019). This lack of adequate involvement of men in their children's early education may be responsible for the challenges observed by practitioners, as evidenced in this research.

Several crises affecting early childhood education stakeholders in South Africa are adversely affecting their capacity to contribute to their children's early social and educational development (Okeke, 2018). The report further noted that stakeholders were disappointed with their close relationship with the moms of their kids. The lack of resources left fathers powerless to speak up and be recognized as full men, which caused...
much emotional anger. Men prioritized their employment over seeking care, which postponed seeking it out and upholding standards of masculinity and food security (Daniels et al., 2021). According to Mokhutso (2021), men under tremendous pressure to live up to society's expectations of them are no longer able to handle the pressure and have become violent or self-destructive monsters who kill themselves or their loved ones. The rhetoric around men in South Africa's development and policy discourses has gradually changed over the past ten years (Maluleke & Moyer, 2024). HIV, gender-based violence, and absentee fathers are three significant issues that initiatives aiming to address now heavily centre on men and specific forms of masculinity. There is ample evidence that education is one of the most effective means of promoting gender equality because it gives people the power to question and confront unfair gender conventions as well as the unwritten, frequently implicit laws of masculinity and femininity that most people choose to live by (Machawira & Shawa, 2024). This would provide boys and young men the chance to start rebuilding a more positive definition of masculinity that considers the variety of ways boys can be boys and makes it possible for everyone to feel confident in their masculine identity. Young black masculinities in South Africa are gradually changing to support beliefs and attitudes that are against violent crime in general as well as violence against women (Langa & Leopeng, 2024). Additionally, these young men are more receptive to the emerging positive roles of fatherhood, centred not only on financial support but also on emotional support and a readiness to participate in parenting activities like bathing, changing diapers, and other tasks that women typically perform.

From the preceding, there is a great deal of stress associated with this mental state for men. It is then possible for the child's mother to ignore the father's presence due to his limitations if one fails to provide for one's child. Mathwasa (2018) reported that despite awareness of their role as parents, some did not participate, with several explanations offered. As a result of this study, factors such as alienation, drug and alcohol abuse, indifference, and unemployment contribute to poverty, which makes it difficult for fathers to actively participate in the social development of their children due to a lack of time spent with them (Mathwasa, 2018).

The early childhood development centres in rural areas face several challenges and needs, according to Hannaway et al. (2019). These include a lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, parent involvement, crowded classrooms, in-service training needs, rural community requirements, and assistance from an institution offering open distance learning (ODL). Teaching and learning in early childhood development (ECD) are among the challenges facing South African practitioners (Visser et al., 2021). Similar discussions over the declining quality of ECEC in Sweden resulted in the adoption of legislative guidelines in 2016 that strongly emphasized group size norms and the importance of lesson plans for the development of children (de la Porte et al., 2023). But unlike in the Danish example, there are no extra funding sources or legal requirements for municipal implementation. In order to increase access to practitioner training and resources, Visser et al. (2021) argued that joining larger organizations and established communities of practice would be advantageous. Visser et al. (2021) reported that several factors, including the work of Labantwana, cause these difficulties in providing high-quality ECE. Studies showed that instructors are primarily left to handle this problem independently and are frequently unable to obtain the materials or
assistance required to teach kids Turkish (Temiz, 2022). Despite these limitations, they progress, but their approaches need more scientific rigour or pedagogical validation (Temiz, 2022).

Many South African children lack access to early childhood development programs, including early childhood education (ECE), since formal education has not been made mandatory until 2020. Williams and Samuels, as cited by Visser et al. (2021), also point out that 78 percent of ECD professionals need more training for teaching preschool, and 23% need more training. Leadership is crucial for South African Early Childhood Development (ECD) settings to maintain and enhance quality (Bipath et al., 2021). Lack of access to and poor quality of ECD programs and services result in low primary school survival rates and restricted access to health care and nutritional intervention (Atmore, 2013). Nevertheless, Bipath et al. (2021) showed that most participants needed more knowledge of the ECD policy and its implementation, while the policymakers also needed more leadership to ensure compliance with, encouragement of, and implementation of the ECD implementation guidelines. There is a 72% enrollment rate of Black South African students in higher education, but just a fraction of them enrol in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs and complete them (Steyn et al., 2014). Various levels of preparedness for university studies are reflected by students’ social, educational, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Only a small number of South Africans who are economically wealthy attend well-resourced state schools or private educational institutions (Steyn et al., 2014). Despite this, most students in rural and township areas need to be more resourced and have dysfunctional schools (Steyn et al., 2014). Moreover, while mobile early childhood educators (ECE providers) around the world have always seen their work as a service to families and kids, compared to centre-based ECE programs, mobile ECE centres have not gotten as much attention or acknowledgement from researchers and policymakers (Pattnaik & Lopez, 2023).

In South Africa, studies have been conducted on the development of early childhood (Ugwuanyi et al., 2020; Okeke et al., 2020; Ugwuanyi et al., 2021; Gqoli et al., 2021; Gqoli et al., 2023). Many challenges face conventional ECCE centers in managing their operations. There is little literature on the challenges practitioners face when managing mobile ECCE activities in South Africa. As a result, this study examined the challenges practitioners face in maintaining mobile ECCE centers. The findings of this study have brought to the limelight the challenges that impede the effective implementation of mobile ECE centers in the Free State Province. Based on the findings of this research the stakeholders in ECE will be better informed of what needs to be done in order to have smooth running of the mobile centers.

B. METHOD

To guide the research, the researchers used a qualitative research approach. Our research was conducted according to a phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research aims to discover what humans discover about themselves and to understand the meaning they assign to those experiences. Rather than imposing a preconceived theory or interpretation, it captures the essence and underlying structures of these experiences. According to van Manen, phenomenology aims to investigate the meaning of lived experiences (van Manen, 2019). As a result, in phenomenological research, we explore what an experience is like and what we can learn from it (van Manen 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019). Ten practitioners from an organization providing mobile ECCE in the Free State Province were sampled during this research. According to the research objectives, these participants were purposefully sampled. In order to work as an ECD
practitioner, participants must meet NQF Level 4 requirements. Table 1 shows five practitioners have exceeded this education requirement; some have earned a degree or diploma at Level 5 or 6. There was a wide range of work experience in ECD, with an average of 13 years (M = 13.34).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Educational Qualifications</th>
<th>Experience in ECD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Level 4 in ECD, matric and qualified assessor</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Diploma in ECD</td>
<td>5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Matric and Level 4 in ECD</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Level 4 in ECD, Diploma in ECD, Level 4 Community Development</td>
<td>24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Matric, Level 4 and Level 5 in ECD</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Level 4, 5 and 6 in ECD</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Level 5 in ECD</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Matric, Level 4 in ECD, Diploma in Grade R</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>Matric, Diploma in Adult Basic Education (ABET)</td>
<td>27 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>30 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the necessary data for this study. Specialists of different qualitative research methods thoroughly read the interview guide to ensure its trustworthiness or reliability. Trustworthiness or reliability of an instrument is the degree to which the instrument measures the intended purpose consistently when administered on two or more different occasions. The University of the Free State Faculty of Education's research ethics committee issued an ethical approval certificate with the number UFS-HSD2022/0808/22 before conducting interview sessions. A gatekeeper letter was also obtained from each mobile centre used for the study. A gatekeeper letter is a letter that is issued to the researchers by the proprietor of each of the mobile centres that participated in the study. This letter can also be called an access permit letter that enabled the researchers to access the mobile centres in the study site. The participants were then interviewed at their various mobile centres. The interview was conducted in the practitioners' local language. However, the data gathered in the local language were later translated into English by a local language expert who is proficient in the use of English language. ATLAS.ti was used to analyze qualitative data. ATLAS.ti provides tools for organizing all the text data (such as from interviews or focus groups) together. With ATLAS.ti, it can let the software handle the heavy lifting when it comes to analysing qualitative data. This software makes faster results by leveraging AI and machine learning algorithms to generate deep insights into the data collected.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Result
The results were presented based on the themes that emerged during the data analysis. During the qualitative data analysis, three main themes emerged, and they were presented as shown below.

a. **Theme 1: Language barrier**

As a first point, the writer would like to highlight the fact that most children speak Sotho as their native language. It is also important to note that there are children who speak Xhosa and Tswana as well. When it comes to children from neighbouring countries, particularly those from Zimbabwe who speak Shona, the language barrier becomes a problem most often. The following are extracts from the responses of the participants.

The first participant replied that he knew Shona, but learned Shona because he knew Sotho and Shona, so be translated Sesotho with Shona children, but they weren't Shona”.

As Participant 2 stated, “Especially when it comes to language, because I am a Tswana while they are Sotho, there are some things that I am capable of saying or doing properly in Sotho, I will have to ask my colleagues first.”

In order to understand the language barrier, one must first recognize that most children speak Sotho as their first language. Despite this, some children speak Tswana and Xhosa. In most cases, the language barrier affects children from neighbouring countries who speak Shona. Supporting these findings, results suggest that language barriers may hinder parents' ability to provide their children with quality education when controlling for demographic covariates (St. Amant et al., 2018). In similar research, it was found that children's perceived natural ability to learn and teachers' knowledge regarding complex language and cognitive processes could be significantly improved, as early childhood education is geared toward preparing language foundations through emotional confidence and cultural capability, not ill academic standards (Yu, 2017).

Language-limited children face communication barriers that hinder socialization; teachers emphasize the importance of addressing these challenges and promoting strategies that improve children’s language and social competency (Andres Bolado, 2023). Language, power relations, cultural differences, and cultural disagreements are the most commonly identified barriers to ECE (Norheim & Moser, 2020). To facilitate partnerships, this study suggests several approaches, including employing bilingual staff, hosting parent-teacher conferences with translators, translating materials into different family languages, translanguaging, and being respectful and patient (Norheim & Moser, 2020).

b. **Theme 2: Psychosocial challenges, including alcohol abuse by parents and poverty.**
The participant responded that “Some children come to a play group when their parents fight at home and fight with others.” … In my opinion, when children see their parents do something, they think that it is normal to do that thing in their home.”

As Respondent 2 responded: "Yeah, we're having trouble with incidents like yesterday where a child used vulgar language, living nearby, so we've asked him to contact his parents. The father of the child came with him, so I asked him why he used vulgar language with them. When it comes to raising the child, the father explained that the mother doesn't take part, because she always drinks alcohol. The mother doesn't care, so the father is the only one working".

According to Participant 3, "Most of the challenges that I can discuss with parents are related to their drinking habits. Their children are not taken care of because they take a lot of alcohol.

According to participant 8, the children come from poor families, who cannot afford day care services; we work with children whose parents do not have official identification documents (IDs), and they do not have birth certificates for their children, but we encourage them to register their children at the Department of Home Affairs. In the event that the parents don't succeed, we work with the social workers and explain the situation to them in order to provide assistance to the parents. In our work with children, we often come across parents who are excessively drinking. You find some parents working outside on the farms, so you can see them hustle. In order to go to their farms and apply for jobs, they took their children out of the session so they could stay with them on the farm. It's a very big challenge."

Participants 9 and 10 responded accordingly. "The other challenge is hunger, or people drinking a lot. My suggestion to the government is to ensure that you know that there are these taverns that are always open, and these spots where alcohol is sold and drugs are sold. Perhaps the government can participate in ensuring, if they are saying that this must be closed at this time or that you cannot sell it without a license, that it will help a lot."

Similarly, participant 10 replied, "I have been doing house visits with play groupers and playground facilitators and Masetjane, and I have learned how difficult life is in informal settlements".

Regarding psychosocial challenges, most participants narrated how some children behave mannerlessly, which may be attributed to family factors. There were reports that some children fight very often, thinking that fighting is regular. Participants described how many of the children come from poor families and cannot afford daycare, as well as working with children whose parents do not have official identity documents. Even though the practitioners lack the children's birth certificates, they urge their parents to register them with the Department of Home Affairs. In line with that, negative prior schooling experiences also hindered participation in school activities (Adams-Gardner, 2018). Physical and emotional abuse had a direct effect on early schooling (Skinner et al., 2016).
Consequently, Federal and state governments have been working to change the treatment paradigm to emphasize integrated and family-centred approaches in response to an increase in parental substance use disorders (SUDs) and negatively impacted children's academic skills (Huebner et al., 2017). In addition to misunderstandings between parents and teachers about the role of teachers as psychosocial support providers, omissions from the curriculum related to psychosocial support and difficulties in identifying learners with psychosocial problems were significant barriers to early learning (Abu Khudair et al., 2024).

c. Theme 3: Rain, wind, cold and dust

A participant responded thus: "The weather is responsible for the challenges that we are going through. In case of bad weather, like rain and wind, then we won't be able to work that day."

Respondent 3 said, "It's not conducive for us and also for the children to go to the children when it's raining". However, if we had a hall or shelter, then we wouldn't have to miss sessions". During winter, it is cold, so the other children sometimes do not have shoes, so they come barefoot. In order to prevent them from getting cold, we have to close those gazebos when we are having events.

The eighth participant responded that "We have to build gazebos (tents), but the weather sometimes prevents us from doing so, it's really windy, which causes the tents to blow away, and sometimes there are too many children in one tent due to the fact that we only have two practitioners, so there is one tent for each practitioner [but each tent can hold only 20 children]." The weather is a challenge, especially on windy days and during the winter months when it is very cold. I think it is a challenge because of where we work according to participant 10".

Here, the practitioners have narrated their bad experiences any time it rains. According to them, the weather has a lot to do with the challenges we are facing. The weather determines whether we can work; if it is raining or windy, we cannot work. Rain will make engaging in school activities inconvenient for us and the children. In contrast, if we can provide a hall or shelter for them, we will not miss any sessions. In line with these findings, Malleus et al. (2017) revealed that children's responses in kindergarten are influenced more by how clouds appear, with the majority relating rain clouds to water. The weather conditions experienced by children in Northern Europe and Melbourne, Australia, affect their learning activities (Harrison et al., 2017). However, Children can learn about weather in an embodied and relational way when they participate in dance improvisation, which challenges the common practice of learning about weather separately from classroom teaching (Pollitt et al., 2021).

2. Discussion

Using a phenomenological research design, it investigated the challenges faced by practitioners who maintain mobile ECCE centres. The practitioners encountered
many challenges when maintaining mobile ECCE centres, especially when dealing with children from neighbouring countries, especially children from Zimbabwe who speak Shona, and language barriers. It is essential to acknowledge that most children speak Sotho as their first language to understand the language barrier. It should be noted, however, that there are also children who speak Tswana and Xhosa. Usually, children who speak Shona from neighbouring countries suffer from language barriers. St. Amant et al. (2018) found that language barriers hinder parents' ability to provide quality education to their children when controlling for demographic factors. According to a similar study, teachers' knowledge about complex language and cognitive processes could be significantly improved and children's perceived natural ability to learn could be enhanced. Early childhood education focuses on developing language foundations through emotional self-confidence and cultural competency rather than academic standards (Yu, 2017). Teachers must focus on these challenges and promote strategies to improve children's language and social competence (Andres Bolado, 2023). Children with language impairments face communication challenges, which interfere with their socialization and learning (Andres Bolado, 2023). Language, power relations, cultural differences, and disagreements are the most common barriers to early childhood education (Norheim & Moser, 2020). This study offers several suggestions for fostering partnerships, including employing bilingual staff, hosting parent-teacher conferences with translators, translating materials into different family languages, translanguaging, and showing patience and respect (Norheim & Moser, 2020).

Children's social and educational development is adversely affected by many psychosocial challenges, including alcohol abuse by parents and poverty; rain, wind, cold, and dust are disruptive to mobile ECD programs. The findings of this study are supported by related empirical evidence. In the early childhood development industry, Hannaway et al. (2019) have identified several challenges and needs, including a lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, parental involvement, crowded classrooms, in-service training, rural community needs, and assistance from an institution that offers open distance learning (ODL). The teaching and learning of young children, management, leadership, and the environment for early childhood development (ECD) have challenged ECD practitioners in South Africa (Visser et al., 2021). Thus, Visser et al. (2021) predicted that joining a larger organization and well-established community of practice would increase the availability of practitioner training and resources for the organization involved in this study. Based on the work of Labantwana and others, Visser et al. (2021) noted several reasons for these difficulties in providing high-quality ECE. In South Africa, the majority of young children are born into poverty, and formal education was not mandated until 2020, so ECD programs, such as ECE, are not accessible to most children.

Moreover, Visser et al. (2021) cite Williams and Samuels that many ECD professionals need preschool credentials (78%) and are untrained (23%). Similar debates about the deteriorating quality of ECEC in Sweden led to legislative guidelines 2016 that strongly emphasized lesson plans and group size norms for children's development (de la Porte et al., 2023). However, there are no additional financing sources or legislative
prerequisites for municipal adoption, in contrast to the Danish model (de la Porte et al., 2023).

Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs' quality in South African settings must have strong leadership (Bipath et al., 2021). Insufficient access to and poor quality of ECD programs and services result in low primary school survival rates and restricted access to health care and nutritional intervention (Atmore, 2013). The results of Bipath et al. (2021) showed that most participants did not know much about the ECD policy and how it was implemented, and policymakers also lacked the leadership needed to ensure that the guidelines for implementation were followed, encouraged, and followed through. Similar findings demonstrated that teachers are usually left to deal with this issue alone and are frequently unable to get the resources or support needed to teach Turkish to children (Temiz, 2022). However, the practitioners achieved some progress despite these drawbacks, but their methods need to be supported by science or pedagogy (Temiz, 2022).

**D. CONCLUSION**

Several challenges exist when maintaining mobile ECCE centres, as revealed by this study. In light of these challenges (language, psychosocial, wind rain, among others), it can be concluded that mobile ECCE centres in Bloemfontein, South Africa cannot operate effectively. Accordingly, the researchers advise appropriate education authorities in charge of mobile centres to ensure an environment conducive to quality mobile ECCE learning by creating enabling environments such as developing adequate policy frameworks to address such challenges.

The findings of this study have both practical and policy significance/implications for ECE research. This is because the study's findings have highlighted the challenges practitioners encounter in implementing mobile ECE programs. This will benefit the ECE research because it has formed an empirical basis from which future research can refer. The policy significance of these findings is that ECE policymakers can be better informed of the need to formulate a policy framework that can address the identified challenges to the effective implementation of mobile ECE centers. The generalizability of the findings of this research may be limited by the area covered in this research. This research considered only the mobile ECE centres within the Free State province. Considering that only the ECE centers in the Free State Province may not have given a clear picture of the challenges hindering the implementation of mobile ECE centres in South Africa. In light of the above limiting factor, the researchers suggest that future researchers can replicate this study to have a more comprehensive coverage of the South African provinces than the current study.

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F. REFERENCES


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