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# Pedagogical Leadership in Early Childhood Development: A Means for Quality Practices through Professional Training

## Abstract

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to highlight the significance of pedagogical leadership (PL) in improving the quality of practice in early childhood development (ECD) centres. ECD in South Africa is defined as the procedures by means of which children from birth to 9 years grow and flourish emotionally, morally, socially, physically and spiritually (DoE, 2001, p. 7). The paper further argues how professional training and development can equip ECD leaders and teachers with the necessary skills for pedagogical leadership. Currently, in South Africa the majority of ECD leaders, especially those in the previously marginalised ECD communities, have assumed their positions without any professional training. Most ECD leaders are owners who react to the government's call to establish ECD centres in order to make ECD services accessible to all South African children. Leadership in ECD is a less discussed and poorly researched subject in South Africa. Pedagogical leadership in ECD is defined and its status in South Africa is examined in this paper and suggestions are made concerning how it may be transformed and developed.

Keywords: leadership, early childhood development, professional training, quality, pedagogy

## Introduction

Leadership in ECD has not been a well-researched subject, but currently considerable attention is being paid to the importance of leadership in early childhood. In primary and high schools in South Africa there has been a great deal of discussion and many debates directed at different forms of leadership, such as instructional, transformational and distributed leadership. 'The field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), has engendered a growing interest in Pedagogical Leadership (PL) arising from the need to increase quality and influence organisational change' (Andrews, 2009, p. 55). Leaders within any organisation have a major obligation to direct the organisation towards the realisation of organisational goals. This can be achieved through the leaders' efforts to promote and support a quality milieu for teaching and learning outside the day to day administrative chores. It, therefore calls for a different kind of leadership, which is referred to as pedagogical leadership.

PL requires a shift from focusing solely on administrative and managerial responsibilities to also directing attention to teaching and learning. It requires content knowledge and an understanding of the field in order to provide needed support and guidance. This author argues that both the ECD manager and the teacher are pedagogical leaders within the ECD space, but with different roles and responsibilities.

ECD leadership should be in a position to lead and support teaching and learning practice in the right direction. The teacher is also a pedagogical leader in his/her own space where the exhibition of credible knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning in the classroom is expected. This knowledge and understanding should impact on practice positively to such an extent that it improves quality.

The early childhood development sector is an area that needs to support and promote high quality early learning settings for young children. Therefore, the most important task that leaders in the ECD field can undertake is to advance and improve the teaching and learning milieu so that it is of a high quality. Andrews (2009) argues that to do this beyond completing administrative tasks performed by leaders, pedagogical leadership is required. This is currently more frequently found in teachers' dialogues and publications, than in practice in the field. PL is the concept that could drive quality ECD practice. According to Rodd (2013), PLs endeavour to implement the philosophy and vision of the centre through mentoring and functioning with other teachers, whilst advocating viewing children as competent and capable. The challenge in South Africa is that the majority of ECD leaders and teachers have not had some professional training and this often has a negative influence on the quality of their practice. Fonsen (2013, p. 182) supports this notion by indicating that 'PL is needed in providing high quality Early Childhood Education (ECE)'. Globally, there is considerable interest and debate in the area of leadership which, according to Strehmel (2016, p. 344), 'is crucial in enhancing quality in early education'. In the field of ECEC Andrews (2009) believes that increasing attention has been given to PL, arising from the need to increase quality and influence organisational change.

## Quality practice in ECD

Quality is seen as 'an ongoing method of evaluating, assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving the quality of Open Distance Learning (ODL) education systems, institutions and programs' (Mahlangu, 2018, p. 147). High level quality practice within an ECD space is important in achieving organisational goals which contribute significantly to the ground work for the success of children in school and in life. Taguma et al. (2012, p. 13) see quality as 'a starting point in the discussion of ECEC among researchers because it can be best defined in terms of qualifications and value judgments'. A majority of South Africans attach quality to qualifications as they believe more can be expected from a qualified person. There is an expectation and belief that the better qualified people are, the more they will show high quality in their practice and bring positive growth and development to organisations. Defining quality of practice in ECD may be based on different countries' contexts and may also depend on the quality of leadership provided. Quality practice, amongst others, is an organisational goal that ECD centres should strive to achieve.

The achievement of quality practice requires well equipped leaders who will direct the ECD centre along the desired path of sustained teaching and learning. Heikka and Wanigayaneke (2011, p. 510) argue that 'it is time for ECE teachers to step up and lead pedagogical conversations within their classrooms and beyond'.

Fonsen (2013) is also of the view that the delivery of high quality early childhood education necessitates pedagogical leadership.

## ECD leadership in South Africa

ECD in South Africa is led by three governmental departments: the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Health (DoH) and the Department of Education (DoE). Each of these departments is accountable to ECD in terms of compliance with social, health and curriculum matters as well as governance issues. The three government departments have different responsibilities with regard to achieving quality practice and service in the ECD sector. PL in the South African context will manifest itself within the DoE which is responsible for teaching and learning.

According to the definition, ECD in South Africa is split into three categories. The community centres that cater for children from birth to 4 years, the school-based centres that cater for pre-Grade R and Grade R learners, and that of Grades 1 to 3 learners in the Foundation Phase. Both ECD teachers and centre managers are expected to provide leadership which will lead centres to achieving organisational goals. Researchers attest to the fact that ECD leadership in South Africa needs attention. Aligning herself with Heika and Wanigayaneke, this author believes that it is imperative that South African ECD departments, non-government organisations, teachers and principals start a conversation around PL.

## Pedagogical leadership

Ord et al. (2013, p. 1) define PL as 'the way in which the central task of improving teaching and learning takes place in educational settings as leadership focuses on curriculum and pedagogy rather than on management and administration'. According to Robinson et al. (2009, p. 8), 'PL has a direct connection with positive results for children'. They further assert that pedagogical leadership places an emphasis on educational purposes. Clarkin-Phillips (2009, p. 22) suggests that pedagogical leadership 'commands particular interest because it is pedagogy that impacts most immediately on children'. The author of this paper argues that pedagogical leaders are more concerned about the impact that their leadership has on persons within the organisation. In an educational environment the leadership that exists ought to have a positive influence on the outcomes of the organisation and, therefore, impact positively on learners.

Robinson et al. (2009, p. 38) maintain that 'PL has an emphasis on educational purposes such as founding educational goals, curriculum planning and evaluating teachers and teaching'. Heikka and Waniganayake (2011, p. 510) believe that the time has come for early childhood teachers to 'step up to the role of leading pedagogical conversations within classrooms and beyond'. ECD centre managers need to take responsibility for understanding and assuming their roles as pedagogical leaders. Pedagogical leaders according to Coughlin and Baired (2013), should ensure that teachers make methods and time to mirror their own learning, practice and realise multiple perspectives. The same applies to ECD teachers who also are not practicing pedagogical leadership. They need to be aware that they are the leaders and managers of their own classrooms and, therefore, need to direct

teaching and learning in their classrooms. It is important that they take the initiative of leading and transforming practices in their classrooms in an innovative way that will yield excellent outcomes. The principal's challenge as a centre manager is to ensure that she/he works with teachers to encourage high levels of classroom practice and raise the quality of teaching and learning as well as academic achievement of learners. Currently what is happening in South Africa, is that the majority of ECD centres in previously disadvantaged sites, have both principals and practitioners who are not professionally trained. This was noted during the period when the author was working for the Department of Education at a District level responsible for supporting and monitoring ECD practitioners from 2009 to 2016 September when profiling practitioners.

## Professional training and development: a means for quality practice

Goldstein and Ford (2002 in Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009, p. 452), refer to training as an approach to learning and development that is systematic in improving organisational, team and individual effectiveness. They also refer to development as activities leading to the attainment of new abilities or an understanding for purposes of personal growth. Modise (2017, p. 73) claims 'that better qualified personnel with specialised or professional training are important in determining the quality of practice and production which also applies to ECD centres as learning organisations'. Having leaders who have specialised or professional training is more likely to transform organisations into ECD practices that are of a high quality. Melhuish et al. (2016) advocate on-going professional development (PD) for increased pedagogical knowledge and improved quality in ECD practice. ECD leaders with pedagogical knowledge impact positively on the quality of practice and yield positive learner outcomes.

Continuous staff development ensures continuity, strength and enhancement of quality practice. According to Melhuish et al. (2016, p. 3), 'there is ample evidence that providing sector-specific qualifications and professional development for educators, improves children's learning and wellbeing'. The same applies to centre managers and teachers. The professional development of ECD leaders and teachers is important to the quality of practice at their centres. Professional development can, therefore, be used to transform ECD leadership in South Africa through internal and external training, mentoring and coaching activities and by encouraging the formulation of communities of practice. Major improvements in the South African ECD leadership sector can be brought about by transformation which will be a learning experience for all involved. Anderson and Anderson (2001, p. 39) define transformation as 'a drastic change which is so important that it requires a change of mind, behaviour and culture'. In other words they mean that transformation demands a revolution in human awareness that completely changes the way an organisation and its people see the world. To transform the current status of ECD leadership, it is imperative that leaders are immersed in intensive continuing training.

### Internal and external training

Modise (2017) cites the importance of training in finding solutions to problems identified and applied in organisational development and also promoting employee

improvement. Training events and proceedings may encompass variety of methodologies, which Sheridan et al. (2009, p. 6) provide clear examples conferences, in-service presentations, workshops, discussions, live or web-based lectures, behaviour rehearsal, live or video demonstration, tutorials, manuals, and a host of other modes, synchronous and asynchronous, that divulge information and endeavour to affect professional practice.

Mentoring and coaching play an essential part in transforming and improving employee practices for the successful achievement of organisational goals. Mentees also need to be encouraged to form communities of practice where they have opportunities to interact with other colleagues.

## Mentoring and coaching

According to Fransson and Gustafsson (2008), mentoring involves interaction between parties where they discuss issues, such as teaching and learning and ways of supporting and encouraging mentees. Mentoring is a strategy for achieving proficient, individual and organisational development. By creating a supportive culture, mentoring can provide an environment for transformative learning to occur. Through this experience mentoring becomes a transformative relationship in which individuals reconstruct their potential selves. Teachers learn, grow and change; success is evidenced by developed skills and joy in the collaborative experience and an enthusiasm to continue after they have accomplished their initial goals. The training process of mentoring and coaching can be conducted by means of instructions, discussions, facilitation, teamwork, problem solving and feedback. 'Coaching is said to be a collective activity and it is through engaging with planning that one can build trust and change norms' (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012, p. 56).

## Communities of practice

Wenger (1998, cited in Wenger, 2002, p. 235), defines communities of practice (CoP) as groups of individuals who come together on the basis of a common professional interest and a desire to improve their practice in a particular area by sharing their knowledge, insights and observations. Wenger (2002) further explains CoP as the building blocks of social learning because they are social containers of competences that make up such a system. CoP may be regarded as the practise of continuing professional development that is mostly known and practised in the ECD sector and is an intervention to equip and empower each other. The quality of ECEC processes, i.e. interaction between educational professionals in ECD, is influenced by quality orientation and structure.

## Implications for practice within the South African context

Since some studies, including those of Clasquin-Johnson (2011) and Modise (2017), suggest a lack of professional training in the majority of ECD centre managers and teachers, it is imperative that conversations should begin concerning how all the adults dealing with young children may be empowered pedagogically. Government departments and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) need to start these conversations. Continuous internal and external training planned by NGOs and private training institutions for ECD leaders, will benefit the sector and

impact positively on the performance of managers and teachers and, ultimately, on learner outcomes. Centre managers and teachers need an understanding of ECE practice to be able to provide PL. For current leadership to be evident in education contexts, PL need to be more precise in its approach, given that it is concerned with context, people and development and the construction of knowledge.

## Conclusion

Transforming leadership in ECD demonstrates strong links between professional development through internal and external training, mentoring and coaching as well as the formulation of communities of practice. Quality practice in ECD in South Africa is possible through transformed ECD leadership which focuses on teaching and learning and which is, essentially, pedagogic leadership.

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