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ECCE Centre Managers' Understanding of Instructional Leadership in Rural South Africa

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative paper is to explore Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centre managers' understanding of instructional leadership. Leadership skills are sometimes developed on the job. However, instructional leadership requires vision, a sound managerial style, relevant knowledge, skills, organisational acumen, and self-development. While these skills fall under management rather than leadership, Early Childhood Care and Education centre leaders in rural areas must still ensure that their centres function smoothly. Due to the minimal research conducted on the Early Childhood Care and Education centre managers' understanding of instructional leadership of rural ECCE centres in South Africa, the study aims to highlight the challenges, knowledge, practices and support provided to ensuring instructional leadership is achieved in the centres. A qualitative research approach was conducted in the Early Childhood Care and Education centres in the Black settlement areas of the Gauteng Province. Five centre managers were purposively selected from five rural community settings and interviewed using face-to-face semi-structured interviews to generate data. Data were thematically analysed to get themes and subthemes. Findings reveal that Early Childhood Care and Education centre managers' understanding of instructional leadership was constrained by uneven funding, lack of support and training in ECCE centre management. The conclusion is that most managers rely on untrained, poorly remunerated practitioners for the daily operations in the centre. For Early Childhood Care and Education centres to be well managed for sustainable development, well-trained, informed, visionary, experienced, and critical-thinking leaders and practitioners are needed. The study may be helpful to centre managers, policy-makers and other stakeholders.

Keywords: centre managers, leadership and management, Early Childhood Care and Education, ECCE centres, instructional leadership, professional development

Introduction

This paper is based on the findings of a project carried out in ECCE centres on instructional leadership in rural South Africa. The new policy framework introduced aimed to transform the ECCE schooling system (Christie, 2010). According to Pansiri (2008), instructional leadership is an active professional collaboration between teachers/practitioners for effective curriculum implementation and learner improvement. Similarly, instructional leadership focuses on achieving school goals, curriculum implementation, teaching and learning and improving the general education and learning environment (Walker & Hallinger, 2015). The implication is a direct connection between instructional leadership and teaching and learning. The argument is that instructional leaders are responsible for ensuring teaching and learning and educational resources are accessible to every learner in the centre. Among others, the argument is that spatial resources are not provided in the context of South African ECCE centres, requiring ECCE centre managers to be innovative

to achieve centre goals. Instructional leadership practices require identified performance practices of ensuring the requisite resources are made available by instructional leaders bestowed with administrative powers, authority and allocated funds for facilities that promote teaching and learning. Not much-researched evidence is available on instructional leaders in rural ECCE centres in South Africa. Most research done is on inequities in resource allocation and challenges of teaching and learning (Maharaj, Robinson & McIntyre, 2018). Instructional leadership, in this paper, assumes that ECCE centre principals are in authority and can ensure teaching resources direct the centre towards the achievement of defined objectives. The assumption is that ECCE centre leaders can manage the centres by affording practitioners and learners support, and by providing educational resources (Piot & Kelchtermans, 2016) to ensure effective teaching and learning in the centre. The challenge, however, is in educational disparities in South Africa's educational landscape, notably in respect of instructional leadership, and South African ECCE centres' contextual factors.

Managing ECCE centres

ECCE centres in the South African rural context operate under challenging conditions due to the historical background, budgetary constraints, role expectations, and education status (Nkambule et al., 2011). These aspects constrain the achievement of instructional leadership and the community's expectations. The constraints need to be removed to enable the centre managers to connect theory and practice to merge the children's worlds without compromising their learning. Managing ECCE centres in rural areas and informal settlements have a range of problems that include inadequate infrastructure, under-trained and demotivated educators, low expectations and poor skills in instructional leadership. The context of ECCE centre management is complicated by changes in centre managers' roles requiring professionalism and qualifications (Van der Westhuizen & Van Vuuren, 2007). To address the problem of instructional leadership for ECCE centres, the Department of Education in SA introduced leadership and management programmes to capacitate principals with leadership skills. However, ECCE centres were not included in the programme because they fall under the Department of Social Development, not funding professional development. Most rural ECCE centres are informal but some are registered under the Department of Social Development to get sponsorship. These centres enrol Pre-Grade R children and offer programmes designed for children between 0-4 years and 5-6 years of age. Still, the practitioners who operate in ECCE centres are without proper documentation, untrained and unqualified.

ECCE centre managers/principals

Many countries have ECCE centres but refer to ECCE leaders differently due to allocated responsibilities. For example, in South Africa, ECCE leaders are referred to as principals. In countries like Finland and Germany (amongst others), leaders may be called the director, while some may refer to them as managers. There is a vast difference in the context of ECCE centres in rural areas and those in urban settings, and instructional leadership in ECCE centres require knowledge of children

and effective communication with stakeholders (Harrison, 2020). The ECCE centre managers own one or more centres but are unqualified, old and not keen to advance themselves further, professionally and academically. These managers are mothers and grannies who together with parents in the community, were struggling, and saw the centre development as an opportunity to alleviate their struggles. Though employed, the parents cannot afford to pay fees for their children to go to formal ECCE centres far from their homes. The centre managers needed money to survive and decided to establish informal ECCE centres. To centre managers, the rural ECCE centres are a business opportunity benefitting both the employed mothers and the centre principals who are retired but available to look after children (Modise, 2019). The ECCE leaders managing the centre love children and have a deeper sensitivity level, but lack curriculum knowledge to ensure practitioner and learner support. They require training from the government and non-governmental organisations to provide for the needs of practitioners and learners. There is a need to develop their skills to fulfil job responsibilities and the specialised needs of rural ECCE centres. Prepared leaders are more effective and may use a variety of approaches. Understanding instructional leadership practices would help improve leadership skills.

Practitioners' professional development

Most ECCE centres locally and internationally engage in professional development, except the informal ones. Equipping centre managers with instructional leadership skills may enhance teaching and learning, and improve their leadership skills. Professional development activities such as “in-service” training programmes and workshops depend on the availability of resources and support in the area. They are linked to ECCE centre goals for improved practice. According to Modise (2019), the optimal leadership of ECCE centres may be carried out by the government and non-governmental organisations to equip ECCE principals with the ability to lead and turn around ECCE centres. Instructional leadership cannot be acquired if there are still disparities in support and contextual factors (Walker & Hallinger, 2015). Instructional leadership requires providing the best possible resources to ensure a safe and secure ECCE sector and active professional collaboration for effective curriculum implementation and learner improvement (Pansiri, 2008). The implication is a direct connection between leadership and teaching and learning in an education setting (Xaba, 2012). Teaching and knowledge geared towards a shared vision and quality, no matter the context, should emphasise developing a shared vision (Ngcobo & Tickly, 2010). The guiding principles of policymakers should be for constant professional development for problem-solving. The conditions under which centre managers operate should improve centre practice and understanding to enable the integration and application of content knowledge to real-life situations (Campbell & Gross, 2012).

Research design and methodology

This empirical research explored ECCE centre managers' understanding of instructional leadership in ECCE centres in rural South Africa, addressing ECCE centre managers' understanding of instructional leadership at an ECCE centre. How

they practise instructional leadership? The centre managers' challenges? And what leaders want to be changed regarding ECCE centre-leadership. The qualitative case study research sought to understand the research problem from the local population's perspectives (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016). Five principals owning ECCE centres in different rural community settings were interviewed using semi-structured research questions. The interview questions extracted insightful responses about their understanding of instructional leadership. Relevant ECCE documents were analysed to gain a deeper insight into instructional leadership in ECCE centres. The qualitative approach enabled the researchers to better understand ECCE managers understanding of issues within a specific context promoting understanding of instructional leadership practices and roles of ECCE managers (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016).

Theoretical framework

The accountability theory guided the study because instructional leadership is an accountability function that seeks to improve the management of ECCE centres in a country. Themes emerged from the research questions and were corroborated by the literature consulted. The theories illuminated the constructs under investigation, conveyed, described, predicted and explained meanings of issues under study (Boyatzis, Rochford & Taylor, 2015). The ontological perspective of a phenomenon being meaningless unless people give sense to it was best understood through the ECCE centre managers' interpretation and analysis of instructional leadership practices. Epistemological knowledge supplied from different views and beliefs of centre managers was rational, justified, and truthful (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The theoretical framework helped explain ECCE principals' understanding of instructional practices. Quality and excellence in education require leaders and managers to implement instructional leadership to ensure effective teaching and learning and to satisfy the learners' expectations and needs through conditions necessary for achieving desired outcomes.

Discussion

The first question was about ECCE centre managers' understanding of instructional leadership at an ECCE centre. The theme that emerged was ignorance regarding instructional leadership. Their understanding of instructional leadership was equated to owning more centres, indicating being unclear about their instructional leadership role. They, however, made administrative decisions that kept their centres sustainable and ongoing.

The second question was on how they practised instructional leadership elicited a theme of Ubuntu. The centre managers acted with care and sensitivity towards children, and the community appreciated their service. The centre managers allowed children whose parents worked until late to stay in their centres until they came from work, caring for their children like family members, just like a mom or granny would do.

The third question was on the centre managers' challenges brought about by lack of support for ECCE centre managers. Responses highlighted a lack of funding for their practitioners, centres and not for them. They believed that the

empowerment of the practitioners would enhance professional skills that would lead to skilled practitioners who would open up new centres and practice instructional leadership to serve the community.

For the fourth and last question on what principals would want to do differently in their ECCE centres, the theme was government funding and remuneration of ECCE staff. They appreciated the Department of Social Development's provision of nutrition to Grade R children. However, they felt that the Government's policy of remunerating Grade R practitioners' schools should apply to the Grade R practitioners in the centre. The non-remuneration of ECCE centre practitioners was considered unfair.

Conclusion

Since there is limited research on leadership practices in ECCE centres in South Africa, it would be beneficial if researchers conducted similar studies to find answers to centre managers' understanding of instructional leadership in ECCE centres. Principals need instructional leadership skills to improve performance in the ECCE centres. The quality of instructional leadership in rural ECCE centres learning depends on the quality of the learning opportunity and support centre managers are provided with, as well as the centre. Professional training and development improves leadership skills. Ubuntu should be central to the school's social context. ECCE leadership serves as a basis for education and fosters an interdependent and mutually beneficial connection between individuals and communities.

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