

How Parents Provide Support for Their Children's Learning in Mobile ECCE Contexts: Practitioners' Views

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Abstract

Researchers are increasingly interested in the role of early childhood care and education (ECCE) provided in mobile units in South Africa. By utilizing mainly transport vehicles such as trucks, the practitioners facilitate teaching and learning to the most vulnerable children aged birth to five years in remote rural areas. The study's primary aim was to explore the practitioners' views on the support parents provide for their children's learning in a mobile ECCE context to promote quality service delivery. The study was theoretically anchored by Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence theory. The researchers adopted the interpretive research paradigm combined with the phenomenological research design to make sense of practitioners' subjectivity. Qualitative data was obtained from semi-structured, in-depth interviews by selecting and engaging twenty conveniently sampled ECCE practitioners. By adhering to the interview guide, the researchers focused on the study's objectives to elicit rich data. The collected data was analyzed thematically using the Atlas. Ti software. Findings revealed that parents support practitioners through involvement in decision-making processes, regular meeting attendance, and cleaning the mobile units. It was recommended that better parental support and increased stakeholder interest in children's early learning will result in children's enhanced early cognitive development for future success.

Keywords: children's early learning, cognitive development, ECCE practitioner, overlapping spheres of influence, parental support

1. Introduction

International research confirms that parental involvement has significant long-term advantages for families, schools, and countries' economies (Meier & Lemmer, 2015). Early childhood education has become critically dependent on parental participation (Zeynep, 2016). Active parental participation is one of the most critical factors in enhancing early childhood outcomes, especially in underprivileged settings (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019). Therefore, it is vital to have two-way communication between the home and the school to establish sound school-parent engagement. Bower and Griffin's (2011) studies on the correlation between parental participation and children's academic achievement demonstrates that parental involvement entails many forms, all of which are considered effective for increasing learners' success.

The primary aim of this study was to explore the views of the practitioners on the parental support provided for children's learning in a mobile ECCE context. Generally, parents in disadvantaged communities are preoccupied in work commitments that prevent their full involvement in their children's education. Also, parents are either unemployed or engage in informal or casual jobs; for example, parents are cleaners, petrol attendants, domestic servants, and farm labourers which are time and energy-consuming (Jensen, 2009). Also, according to Gardner (2017), the living conditions in rural communities directly affect the support for teaching and learning at ECCE centres. Although practitioners attempted to conscientize parents on the importance of their involvement in their children's education, and how they can promote better parent-school engagement despite their work and

financial constraints (Drajeaa & O’Sullivan, 2014), there is much room for improvement.

There are various ways in which parents can provide support to ECCE practitioners and learners at mobile units. Since parents have better access to their children’s lives, they can easily enhance and supplement the work done at early learning centres (Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013). Early childhood learning involves discovery, pre-skills, and learning to prepare for school readiness and how to navigate the challenges of the real-world (ParentingHub, 2016). Practitioners who utilize classroom settings to foster children’s learning and growth, expect parents to also play their part by monitoring homework activities, engaging in school events, and establishing a cordial school-home relationship to enhance young children’s skills for self-discovery, observation, critical-thinking, and cooking and baking to prepare them for success in formal school phases. In terms of teaching young children to hone their observational skills, asking open-ended questions during lessons and at home can help them develop clear, holistic, and divergent interpretations of an occurrence (ParentingHub, 2016). Moreover, every childcare practitioner appreciates volunteers to assist them at ECCE centres to ensure that operations run smoothly. At times they need parental assistance to dress children in jackets to go play outside, or to help serve lunch or snacks, or to serve in a committee to add value to the ECCE centre’s operations.

However, the lack of or excessive parent involvement may negatively affect children’s behaviour inside and outside the classroom, ultimately hindering opportunities for their success and educational growth (Tabaeian, 2016). In this regard, schools worldwide prefer close contact between the home and the school, but parents should not be encouraged to express their opinions about matters of academic education such as lesson delivery (Meier & Lemmer, 2015). Hence, this study aimed to explore practitioner’s views on parental support for their children’s learning in a mobile ECCE context to obtain a deeper understanding of this issue.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Epstein’s (2001) theory on parental involvement in education. The theory is relevant because it takes a team to contribute to a learner’s success; hence, parent involvement is critical to enhance children’s learning. As a collaboration to uplift children’s performance at ECCE centres, parents, practitioners, the school community, and other relevant stakeholders should teamwork to support the education and development of young children. Epstein (2001) mentions three contexts for enabling better outcomes in ECCE spaces: the home, school, and the community — all of which influence learners’ character-building, mindsets, and opportunities for success which Epstein (2001: 44) encapsulates as “overlapping spheres of influence” (Figure 1 below).

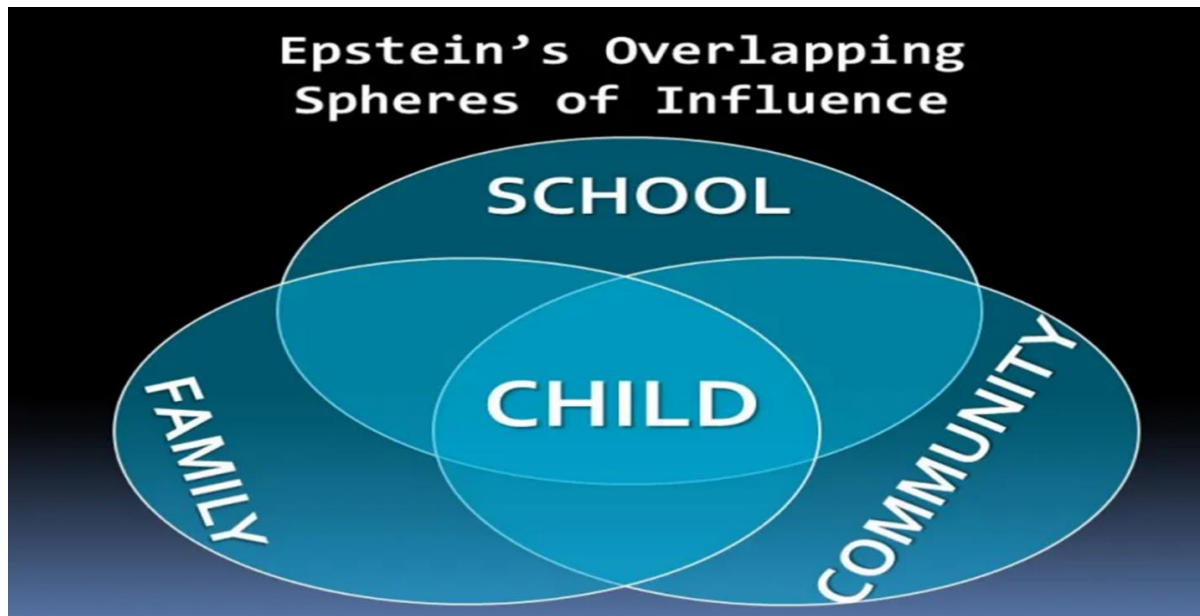


Figure 1. Overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2001)

The core principle of Epstein’s (1995) theory of parent involvement is enacted successfully when parents, practitioners, and the community collaborate to support learning and development in young children’s lives. Epstein (1995) asserts that through effective communication, these three contexts (home, school, and community) influence learners to develop sound moral and positive character traits that drive them to achieve success in life. Hence, it can be seen that Epstein (2001) considers the power of the collective to create

opportunities for success for children and adolescents. This theory contends that “the more significant the overlap of the family, school, and community spheres, the stronger the partnership and greater the likelihood of improved [learner] outcomes” (Latunde, 2017: 258). Initially, a framework of five significant types of involvement that fall within the areas of overlap in the spheres of influence model was identified (Davies, 1991: 377). These included parenting (assisting families with parenting and child-rearing skills and fundamental obligations of families), communication from and to school, volunteers, learning activities at home, and decision-making (Epstein, 1992: 503). A sixth type of school and family partnership was later added to this list which included collaborating with the community.

3. Literature Review

3.1 *The Impact of Parental Support on Practitioners’ Ability to Deliver Services at ECCE Mobile Units*

In a study conducted by McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen and Sekino (2004), it was found that consistent and direct communication between parents and schools positively impacted on how ECCE centres located in low-income ethnic minority areas perceived their engagement with peers, adults, and learning. Strong home-school relationships boost children’s learning outcomes during their childhood and in later years. For example, regular communication with a practitioner, volunteering to assist in mundane classroom tasks, and participating in school activities were linked to children’s advancement from early years to first grade (Mantzicopoulos, 2003; Wildmon, Anthony & Kamau, 2024). One facet of parent support that significantly impacts learners’ achievement is parental expectations; pupils accomplish more when parents anticipate more (Englund, Luckner, Whaley & Egeland, 2004; Book, Gijsselaers, Ritzen & Brand-Gruwel, 2018).

Consequently, active parental support influences all groups and levels of children’s learning outcomes especially when there are supportive parents who express a genuine interest in the education of their children (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Wilder, 2023). In other words, the educational environment and its players should foster an effective collaborative partnership by encouraging open and clear communication channels with the school community, thus bridging the gap between the classroom, the home, and the school (Howland, Anderson, Smiley & Abbott, 2006). Therefore, the participation of parents is multidimensional as it involves monitoring various types of behaviour, changing traditional mindsets, and increasing parents’ and children’s prospects of a better life (Toran-Kaplan, 2004).

3.2 *Challenges Hindering Effective Parental Support in Mobile ECCE Units*

Research establishes at regular intervals that parental support improves academic performance throughout childhood (Meier & Lemmer, 2015). Despairingly, although parents attend parent-teacher meetings, their degree of interest in their children’s academic progress remains lukewarm as they showed little enthusiasm for or involvement in their children’s classroom activities (Zeynep, 2016). While studies on the correlation between parental support and children’s academic performance across subjects (such as literacy and numeracy) have been conducted widely, there is scant information on whether parental supervision in ECCE contexts affects children’s academic performance differently across subjects with a longitudinal design (Wang, Chen, Yan, Zheng, Cheng & He, 2023).

This calls for the implementation of astute, workable, and innovative strategies to encourage parental support at mobile ECCE units. The Department of Education in Virginia Commonwealth University (2009) suggests that hosting events and activities that motivate parents and families to become part of ECCE spaces can yield positive results. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) suggested that some relevant activities for the children should be organized such that the parents and the community are attracted to attend; for example, music programmes, talent shows, arts and crafts exhibitions, dinners sponsored by businesspeople, sports days, and parent-child dance items. Therefore, this paper aimed to explore practitioners’ views on how parents provide support for their children’s learning in mobile ECCE contexts.

According to the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy issued by the Department of Social Development [DSD] (2015), ECCE provision has officially been recognized by the Government as a fundamental and universal human right which all children are equally entitled to without any form of discrimination. Since democracy in 1994, the South African Government introduced numerous policies and stipulations to enable a multi-sectoral framework that acknowledges the central role of early childhood development (ECD). This leads Government departments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to forge partnerships at various levels to develop and improve ECCE services, design clear policies, and initiate relevant programmes that enhance better service delivery in the early learning sector. According to the National Early Learning Development Standards (NELDS, 2009), this transformation promotes the early learning needs of children from birth-to-four years (Ebrahim, 2014). The NELDS (2009) recommends a curriculum-related policy focusing primarily on the growth and development of children aged birth-to-four years, such that every young child in South Africa can participate in some form of ECCE stimulation programme which should include

expressing ideas, availability of resources, and organizing interesting activities that facilitate their growth and development. Further, practitioners should pursue an integrated approach to ensure age-appropriate learning and development through a daily, weekly, and monthly plan or programme. These specific early childhood stimulation programmes must demonstrate clear, relevant, and age-appropriate learning consisting of thoroughly planned, organized information units and activities executed by personnel in care and early education environments.

3.3 Conceptualisation of Mobile ECCE Services

Mobile Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) units perform several critical functions in under-resourced communities. They play an essential role in ensuring that children receive the support necessary for their development (Karegysa, 2021). One primary function of mobile ECCE units is to provide quality early childhood education where traditional infrastructure for ECCE is lacking. In rural and isolated areas, these units deliver educational, health, and nutrition resources directly to children, thus overcoming barriers such as geographical isolation, limited educational facilities, and the lack of health programmes (García, Bennhoff, Leaf & Heckman, 2021). This ensures that children in impoverished communities are not left behind during critical early learning stages essential for cognitive, social, and emotional development (García, Heckman & Ronda, 2023). Mobile ECCE programmes which incorporate health check-ups and nutritional interventions, recognize the vital link between health, nutrition, and educational outcomes (Harrison, Waniganayake, Brown, Andrews, Hadley & Hatzigianni, 2024). Lastly, mobile ECCE units are crucial in community engagement and parental involvement as they often connect educators and the community, thus nurturing a collaborative relationship where parents and caregivers are actively involved in enhancing young children's quality of education (Johnson, 2023).

3.4 The Concept of Parental Support

Studies reveal that most parents believe they are responsible for promoting their children's learning (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Cape, Cardoso, Miot, Pitogo, Quinio & Merin, 2016). However, it was found that parents faced challenges to assist their children with learning because they did not know which activities would best promote learning. Hence, various parental obligations should be explored across children's daily lives to understand what parents do to accelerate their children's cognitive development including the acquisition of basic mathematical skills, recognizing risks, and how they influence their children's everyday activities in terms of quality outcomes (Niehues, Bundy, Broom & Tranter, 2015). Hence, parents need help in understanding their children's learning profile, as well as developing practical strategies to map children's daily activities. During the child's ECCE phase, interpersonal relationships become more transparent as revealed at parent-teacher conferences (Blitch, 2017). Conversations between children's parents and practitioners expand and strengthen the practitioner-parent-child bond. Consequently, parents find it comfortable to discuss their child's progress in school such that practitioners can suggest strategies or tools to help parents to assist the child achieve better academic outcomes. In addition, early childhood practitioners provide (informally) a range of resources and services such as advice and guidance in children's home language which promotes trust to build relationships that would offer appropriate and relevant support to rural families (French, 2003, 2007). Since, parents are the children's first 'teachers' and the most influential, the critical role they play in developing children's morals, behaviour, attitudes, and skills is of paramount importance (McDermott, 2008).

3.5 Theories on Parental Support

There are theories in support of parent involvement in children's education: Piaget's cognitive development, Vygotsky's sociocultural, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. These three theories significantly pervade this field of research and are thus discussed herein. With reference to the cognitive development theory Piaget (1981) emphasized that children have a constructive role to play in society when mentored by experienced peers and responsible family members. The basic assumption of this theory is that young children are active learners with a constant zest to match their internal constructions (their view of the natural world) with external constructions or the external realities they face within their surroundings. Children assimilate new learning but sometimes imbibe 'incorrect' views of the world quicker, if they are actively involved with negative and deviant people in their surroundings. Therefore, children learn best when they have opportunities to interact within their environment, particularly with their parents who are agents to promote learning experiences (Athey, 2000). For example, parent involvement activities such as monitoring and assisting in homework tasks create opportunities for children to interact meaningfully with their parents as children construct knowledge within a conducive social and physical environment (Bailey, Silvern, Brabham & Ross, 2004). As such, Piaget's (1981) social development theory highlights that parental involvement is imperative for children's holistic development for future academic achievements.

Concerning the sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1978) shed light on the physical and social relationship between human beings and their environment. The impact of social and cultural aspects on children's development and

learning is significant (Vygotsky, 1978). For instance, human beings are surrounded by family members and are thus influenced by the culture in which they live (Rieber & Robison, 2004). Children's interaction with their family members fosters learning and development since the family is the hub for learning the basics of life inside and outside the home. For this reason, children gain valuable knowledge about the world through interacting with family members.

Bronfenbrenner (1971) advocates the ecological systems theory which entails explaining parent involvement in terms of the development of children which is influenced not only by factors within the child, but also by their families and the surrounding world. This theory focuses on the developing child's interactions with people, objects, and symbols in proximal processes across multiple settings and systems (Prior & Gerard, 2007). Specifically, "a microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1971: 22). The family, school practitioners, peers, child health and care services, and the neighbourhood are some of the main settings and institutions in a microsystem. Children experience a reciprocal face-to-face relationship with these immediate surroundings, while institutions within the microsystem interact with and influence each other. For example, school affects the neighbourhood, and the neighbourhood impacts the child's family members.

All three theories are relevant to the child's surroundings, including their influences. There are similarities among these three theories, as explained by Epstein (1991), who also advocated for parent involvement in children's education by emphasizing that children, schools, families, and communities are overlapping spheres of influence.

3.6 Perspectives of Educators on Parental Support

Practitioners must understand how and why they should involve parents in enhancing young children's education. A study by Whitaker and Hoover-Dempsey (2013) investigated the link between schools and parents, specifically the impact of parental involvement, and the results revealed that practitioners' roles and perspectives on school activities significantly impacted parents' understanding of being involved in their children's education. Also, developing a positive, harmonious, and productive relationship between practitioners and parents helps young children achieve academic goals while being prepared for school readiness (Epstein, 1991). Organizing a development programme and training for practitioners and parents strengthens and supports such a relationship (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). Also, initiating parental involvement programmes regionally or in school clusters broadens the scope of parental inclusion in ECCE settings, which promotes quality early education.

Moreover, Okeke (2014) conducted research regarding the impact of effective home-school partnerships by using a descriptive case study design — the findings revealed that parents care and that they are willing to involve themselves in their children's education actively. Still, most parents do not know how to get involved. Okeke's (2014) study also advises the Government to design specific and clear policy guidelines on how practitioners at ECCE centres can encourage parents to become actively involved in school matters to uplift their children's all-round performance.

3.7 Importance of Parental Support on Children's Learning

Why do parents have to get involved in their children's education? Simply, parents' involvement in their child's learning processes offers many opportunities for success and a better life. According to the Centre for Child Well-Being (2010), parental involvement in their children's learning improves their (children's) morale, attitude, and academic achievement across all subject areas while promoting better behaviour, social adjustment, and sound values. In other words, family involvement in education helps children to grow up to be productive and responsible members of society. This means that involving parents in educating their children is equivalent to saying that the school is proactive in implementing changes for improved development among the learners. As parent involvement increases, practitioners and school administrators also lift the bar to attain quality performance in ECCE education (Sapungan, 2014).

3.8 Factors Impacting Parental Support Regarding Children's Learning

3.8.1 Family Type

The extent and form of parental involvement are strongly influenced by social class, maternal level of education, material deprivation, maternal psychosocial health, single-parent status, and, to a lesser degree, family ethnicity (Suizzo & Stapleton, 2007). In related research on family engagement in early childhood education, Halgunseth, Petersen, Stark and Moodie (2009) reiterate parental support to include the entire family in the home-school relationship and refer to this as family engagement. Since the home-school relationship in early childhood education refers to the formal and informal relationships between families and their young children's educational settings, participation in early childhood-based activities and regular communication between parents and practitioners are associated with better results for young ECCE children.

3.8.2 Parents' Incomes

Jeynes (2002) states that a child's status is determined by the parents' occupations, income levels, and the locality in which the child is brought up. It is understood that low socioeconomic status negatively affects learners' academic achievement due to the effects of the stress of day-to-day survival, which precipitates tension at home. The ECCE mobile units help to bridge the gap in affording underprivileged children the opportunity to access education in remote marginalized areas. However, studies by Emmon (2005) and Jeynes (2002) have repeatedly provided evidence of the harsh reality of homes with low incomes that cannot access quality ECCE education, in contrast to those with high incomes. The implication is that poor parents must participate in ECCE centre activities to mitigate the effects of their children not attending a well-resourced early education facility.

3.8.3 Parent Level of Education

Emmon (2005) and Jeynes also provide evidence of the influence of parents' education on their children's psyche to achieve academic prowess at high levels. Compared to parents with low levels of education, highly educated parents are more likely to define high levels of education as desirable, encourage their children to excel in school, and have higher expectations for their children's academic achievement (Alexander, Entwisle & Bedinger, 1994; Cohen, 1989; Dauber, Alexander, Entwisle, 1996; Davis-Kean & Schnabel, 2002; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Lee & Croninger, 1994). Moreover, highly educated parents have teaching, nurturing, and monitoring styles that promote children's holistic development (Bee et al., 1969; Harris, Terrel & Allen, 1999; Laosa, 1980). They also engage their children in quality verbal interactions, whereas lowly educated parents struggle with interacting at a high level when rearing their children (Hoff, 2003; Richman, Miller & Levine, 1992; Uribe, Levine & Levine, 1993). This calls for greater cooperation between ECCE personnel and parents from low-income areas to bridge the disparity gap in parents' educational status to ensure that all children, regardless of background, are afforded the best possible early childhood education.

3.8.4 Psychosocial State

Childhood psychosocial dysfunction (CPD), such as aggressive behaviour, fear, and anxiety, is prevalent in children, and this may lead to deficits in learning. According to population-based studies, 20% of children in South Africa have psychosocial problems (Theunissen, Vogels & Reijneveld, 2012). This alarming condition, which is statistically high and affects children's future, may require considerable expenditure for treatment from healthcare departments. According to Spijkers, Jansen and Reijneveld (2013), the earlier a child's behavioural issues manifest, the greater the risk that they will worsen as the condition is likely to persist in adulthood.

3.8.5 Parent Social Capital Level

There are reasons why family structure, often measured by whether or not both parents are present in the household, is used as a measure of social capital. Compared to two parents, single parents would not have as much time and attention to interact with their children. Family disruption through divorce (and death) often leads to a change of residence that breaks established relations in previous homes. However, empirical findings show that these reasons for using family structure as a proxy for social capital do not always hold. For example, the development outcomes of children and youth in two-parent step-families are not much better than those in one-parent families (Kerr & Michalski, 2007; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Teachman et al., 1994). On the other hand, some studies show that single-parenting has no effect on time spent with children (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997) and that geographic location does not affect the education outcomes of children from high-income families (Hoffert et al., 1998).

3.8.6 The Community Factors

Community factors may include a narrow definition of parental support with family-specific issues such as working hours, transportation, working parents, and divorces leading to single parenting issues (Wildmon, Anthony & Kamau, 2024). Schools can support parents by offering various communication methods, not only through face-to-face meetings. Parents and practitioners should recognize the value of proactive parent involvement, which does not require parents to be present at school or assist practitioners in the classroom (Olmstead, 2013).

3.9 Strategies for Parents' Continued Support for Their Children's Learning

Policymakers increasingly recognize parental engagement as integral to promoting educational reform (Wilder, 2014). At the national level, the Constitution (RSA, 1996) and education sector policies define the parameters for parent engagement in schools, including providing incentives and support for engagement (Marpathia, Edge, Legault & Archer, 2010). Practitioners and administrators may need training to sensitize them to how they can support parents in enhancing their children's education (Bray, 2001; OECD, 2012). Suggestions include practitioners organizing 'walk-in' sessions, establishing an open-door policy to visit the school, creating a class website with dedicated space for questions and answers from parents, and organizing home visits. Education

systems can help by identifying milestones and objectives while providing adequate financial resources to meet the desired goals (OECD, 2012).

4. Research Methodology

The study was anchored on Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence theory. Selecting an interpretive research paradigm guided by its philosophical assumptions was suitable, as it aligns with Epstein's theory (Staller & Chen, 2022). Furthermore, a qualitative research approach was employed to collect rich, in-depth data. Within qualitative research, a phenomenological research design was applied to explore practitioners' views on parental support for their children's learning in a mobile ECCE context. Moreover, it was used to make-sense of the practitioners' subjective opinions on the topic at hand.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty mobile ECCE practitioners who were selected through convenient sampling (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). The semi-structured interviews solicited practitioners' views on parental support for their children's learning in a mobile ECCE context. The data collection process enhanced the researchers' focus on the study's specific objectives.

4.1 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was applied to analyze and make-meaning of the collected data (Peel, 2020). Importantly, it explored the practitioners' views on parental support to advance their children's learning in a mobile ECCE context by following Epstein's (2005) theory and the reviewed literature. The data was imported into Atlas. TI software. An independent coder was employed to code the transcribed data which enhanced the accuracy of the coding process and the credibility of the findings (Hosseini et al., 2021). O'Kane, Smith and Lerman (2021) explain that the reliability of findings can be achieved by reducing biases and being transparent in the coding and analysis processes. At the end of the analyses, seven main themes emerged:

- (i) Parents' understanding of their roles at ECCE mobile units;
- (ii) Parents' involvement in decision-making;
- (iii) Involvement in parent-practitioner meetings as a form of resilience;
- (iv) Participation in environmental sanitation at ECCE mobile units;
- (v) Helping children learn at the ECCE mobile units, and with homework;
- (vi) Support through fundraising and collecting donations; and
- (vii) Taking responsibility for their children's education at the ECCE units and at home.

The above themes are presented in the section on findings and interpretation, and supported by verbatim excerpts from practitioners' responses during the semi-structured interviews.

4.2 Ethical Considerations

The ethical approval certificate was issued by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2022/0808/22). Pursuant to this approval, we obtained gatekeepers' permission from the mobile ECCE management to enable us to interact with practitioners. Different interview sessions were conducted with the participants at their various mobile centres.

4.2.1 Findings and Interpretation

Findings suggest that parents provide support to practitioners through their involvement in decision-making, regular attendance at meetings, and participation in the cleaning of the mobile units. Findings also revealed that parental support involved helping the children to learn at the mobile units, and with homework. Parents also provided support by participating in fundraising events and in collecting donations.

Theme 1: Parents' understanding of their roles at the ECCE mobile units

Even though parents understand their roles at mobile units, practitioners expressed the view that not all parents were involved in their children's learning. Practitioner 1 said: "*some parents, because they don't, are not the same.*" In contrast, some practitioners explained that they get support from the parents. Practitioner 18 stated: "*The parents support us as sometimes the parents come and clean the environment for us, they clean the windows, mop the floors, and sweep the yards. Sometimes, they assist us with donations.*" Practitioner 1 added: "*Then, in our daily programme during the morning break when the babies are kept outside with their parents, so parents support us there. We just show the parents what to do and how to help with the children.*"

Theme 2: Parents' involvement in decision-making

The data indicated that parents were also involved in decision-making to promote the quality of education in ECCE centres. Practitioner 17 articulated:

"Yes, parents are involved in the centres' decision-making processes, especially on issues that concern finance,

and even the feeding of the children.”

Practitioner 20: *“Yes, parents are involved in the centres’ decision-making, especially concerning their children.”*

Practitioner 10: *“Most of the time, they are the ones that make decisions. The parents’ meeting is about them discussing issues with the matron and us, and ultimately they are the ones making final decisions for the ECD centre.”*

Theme 3: Involvement in parent-practitioner meetings as a form of resilience

The findings further indicated that during parent-practitioner meetings, resilience is demonstrated.

Practitioner 17: *“The parents are supporting us as sometimes they provide us with finance when we call for support. The community is also helping us when we call for meetings.”*

Practitioner 18: *“The parents help us bring children daily to the centre, and they also attend meetings once every month, though not every parent attends. The parents play significant roles in the centre. Nowadays, parents are earnest about their children’s education, so they get involved. Some parents donate blankets to us. Some parents organize their children’s birthday celebrations with other children in the class.”*

Practitioner 20: *“The parents help us bring children to the centre daily, and they also attend meetings when we invite them. The meeting is usually every month. When asked, the parents also help us with money, but not every parent does so.”*

Practitioner 2: *“They are supportive when I’m having the meeting. I tell them they are coming on this day as I’m going to have the parents’ meeting. If someone is not coming, they will tell me in time that they are going somewhere so that they cannot come on that day. So whenever I do, they support me in everything I want.”*

Practitioner 4: *“Although not all of them, but those who will be present they support coming to workshops, parent meetings, even observe the playgroups.”*

Practitioner 10: *“For instance, parents will be interested in knowing what their children are doing here in the centre and what they do. So now we have started a WhatsApp group for parents in which we post the improvements of children. Say if a child is struggling with a certain skill and when that particular child gets to master that skill that was problematic at first, we post it in the group for other parents to see.”*

Theme 4: Participation in environmental sanitation at the ECCE mobile units

The parents of children attending ECCE units participate by involving themselves in environmental sanitation at the mobile units. The practitioners explained how they obtained support from parents:

Practitioner 18: *“The parents support us; sometimes the parents come and clean the environment for us, they clean the windows, mop the floor, and sweep the yards. Sometimes they assist us with donating money.”*

Practitioner 20: *“The parents support us as they participate in clearing the bushes and keeping the environment clean.”*

Practitioner 1: *“Those who give me support are the ones who are in the group. The parents help me make porridge, clean toys, clean mobiles, and sometimes even help me teach children. When they teach their children, sometimes when they know we allow them to take responsibility for teaching their children. When they attend workshops or the meetings, they come to support us.”*

Practitioner 6: *“Yes, ma’am. If we ask them to come and help us, maybe wash their mats, the carpets, they do come.”*

Theme 5: Helping in children’s learning at the ECCE mobile units, and with homework

Little was found on how parents help children learn at the mobile units, and with homework. Practitioner 2: *“They help them to do their homework. Even as we are doing the after-care programme, we are helping those children at school.”*

This could be because they are not trained to assist children in developing holistic skills in ECCE. Practitioner 4: *“I think so. Most especially those parents that are always supporting us. Whenever they are there, they can see what we do at the playgroups, so there’s a possibility that they will be able to continue doing the same with their children even at home.”*

Theme 6: Support through fundraising and donations

The parents also support ECCE centres through fundraising and donations.

Practitioner 19: *“The parents help us bring children daily to the centre, and they attend meetings four times a year. The parents play crucial roles in the centre. They help us to clean the environment. They also make financial contributions.”*

Practitioner 20: “The parents help us bring children to the centre daily, and they also attend meetings when we invite them. The meeting is usually every month. When asked, the parents also help us with money, but not every parent does so.”

Practitioner 10: “That way, parents will be encouraged to help their children, even at home, to speed up the improvement process so that their children can be posted in the group. Also, in terms of our centre, if it so happens that the funding from the department delays, parents will then contribute so that we can buy that which is needed in the centre.”

Practitioner 16: “Yes, the parents pay school fees.”

Theme 7: Taking responsibility for their children’s learning at the units, and at home

The issue of not all parents participating in their children’s learning at the units, and at home was brought up again. Participants were asked whether parents take responsibility of some activities at the centres, and at home. The practitioners enlightened us on this aspect:

Practitioner 3: “So in our playgroups, the parents come, but not 100%, let me say 30% of them. They will come to the playgroups to see how we develop their children. They also assist in cleaning dishes.”

Practitioner 4: “They do give us support, although not always. When we go to playgroups, there are those few parents who will be assisting us; mostly, it is those parents who are unemployed. We sometimes ask them to help us prepare porridge for the kids or even help us with babies whenever we have any in the playgroup.”

Practitioner 7: “Yes, whenever my child does something at home, they come back to school with it so that they show me, this is what I did at home.”

Practitioner 4: “They demonstrate improvement. It becomes evident that the child is getting support from parents at home. Even when you have given them the books to go home with, when you ask the child, you will hear even when they narrate the stories from that book. It shows that they are getting support from home.”

5. Discussion

It was evident from the participants’ responses that parents understood their roles in the functioning of ECCE mobile units by supporting their children’s education, and contributing towards the upkeep of the facilities, among others. Parental participation is a crucial component in the ECCE sector that generally has a favourable impact on a child’s academic performance (Tabaeian, 2016). Epstein’s theory states that “families, schools, and communities engage in cooperative action to achieve their mutual interests” (Bilton, Jackson & Hymer, 2017: 233). Parents’ involvement through decision-making processes develops partnerships. Also, parents are involved in the centre’s decision-making processes, especially regarding finances and the children’s feeding scheme. Since parental involvement improves academic performance in childhood and other stages of education (Park & Holloway, 2017), parents at ECCE centres demonstrated their commitment to attend parent-teacher meetings and assist with classroom activities, thus displaying their degree of interest in their children’s lives (Zeynep, 2016). Additionally, parents sometimes volunteer in duties that pertained to environmental sanitation at the mobile units; this volunteer work is well organized, includes training, and matching based on volunteers’ skills and programme needs (Epstein, 2005). Epstein (2005) suggests that parents should assist children with homework because learning at home acknowledges the importance of children and parents interacting and communicating about values, educational aspirations, and connections between academic and everyday life. Thus, it is essential that ECCE practitioners access knowledge of children’s learning experiences at home. In support, Hedges and Cooper (2016) report that children experience a continuity of understandings and expectations between home and educational settings; therefore, practitioners should deepen their knowledge of children’s participation in family and community activities which correlates to experiences within the ECCE academic programme.

6. Conclusion

The ECCE mobile units cannot function successfully without parental assistance, as well as financial support. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the DBE and other relevant stakeholders to assist in financing mobile ECCE units to thrive, specifically in rural areas where young children have the right to access quality education that will prepare them for school readiness. Although it was evident that parents were trying to assist in improving conditions at mobile ECCE units, further support is necessary from all relevant stakeholders to enhance young children’s education.

7. Recommendations

Firstly, the DBE should seriously consider the early years of education of children in rural areas. While it is laudable that mobile ECCE units are provided in rural areas for largely the underprivileged, the situation is not ideal and needs intervention by all stakeholders. The DBE and NGOs (among others) need to supply mobile units with more resources as parents in rural areas may not be able to contribute much to the optimum

functioning of ECCE mobile units because their finances are already stretched to the limit.

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Ethical Considerations

The General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2022/0808/22) issued the ethical approval certificate.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' Contributions

The four authors contributed to writing this manuscript through delegation of sections.

Data Availability

The data supporting the study's findings in this article is protected under the ethical regulations of the authors' institutional affiliation. The data is therefore only available upon receiving a formal request from any interested person. Such a request should be directed to the corresponding author, BNN.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency.

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