



# Reimagining systems that support early childhood development centres in offering quality education



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Systems ensure the attainment of goals at any educational level, including quality early childhood education. Various studies focus on the benefits and components of quality early childhood education, yet none emphasise systems that will support early childhood development (ECD) centres in offering quality education. This study explored existing systems that support ECD centres in providing quality education to young children. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and collected data through document analysis and face-to-face interviews with eight participants purposively selected from four ECD centres situated in Pretoria. The data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that national policies, internally generated policies and financial systems support the participating centres in offering quality education. However, many of the participants did not know the existing national policies. The findings also revealed that ECD centres in the township area do not have financial systems to help them provide quality education. The study recommends effective implementation strategies to foster awareness and enforce strict adherence to government policies at ECD centres. The study contributes to awareness and adherence to quality early childhood education by suggesting that ECD centres, principals and teachers should engage in relevant and practical training on effectively establishing systems from the available national education policies that will help them offer quality education.

**Contribution:** This study adds to the body of knowledge by filling in the gaps on how ECD principals and teachers understand national policies and translate them into systems that assist them in managing their centres on a daily basis. The novelty of this study is the empirical input from different disciplines (Early Childhood Education and Management and Policies Studies), in a way that enables one to comprehend the role of educational management and policies studies at the early childhood learning centres in South Africa, which is the emphasis of the Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa.

**Keywords:** system; support; early childhood development centre; quality early childhood care; education.

## Introduction

Quality early childhood education, according to a large body of research, is critical to improving health, academic levels, future employment possibilities and the eradication of poverty and inequities.<sup>1,2</sup> There has recently been increasing global awareness of the value of quality early childhood education as the foundational basis for upward mobility in any nation's educational ladder, especially in the developing countries of Africa, including South Africa. In South African early childhood development (ECD) policy documents and guidelines, quality in early childhood care and education (ECCE) is mainly determined by the structural and process quality input, such as physical infrastructure, the number of toilets and wash basins, the learning programme, group size, teacher-child ratios, the presence of developmentally appropriate education equipment, materials and resources, governance and financial management.<sup>3</sup> To improve the quality of ECCE in South Africa, the government has put several interventions in place. For example, the ECD centres registered with the Department of Social Development are qualified for government funding based on a 'per child subsidy' of R15,00 per child, aimed at children living in impoverished communities.<sup>3</sup> The Department of Higher Education and Training also aims to provide qualified teachers for this sector to improve ECD quality.<sup>4</sup> Enactment of policies, such as the South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the National Early Learning and Development Standards (NELDS), for children birth to 4 years is a sign of government commitment to the early childhood sector. The government made progress in improving the quality of ECCE. However, researchers argue that early childhood education gets

little or no attention at national and local levels in terms of policy guidelines, regulations, equality and delivery of much-needed resources to improve quality education.<sup>3,5</sup> As a result, ECD centres had to develop means to get the necessary support to enhance their ability to offer quality education. Therefore, there is a need to explore and understand the systems that support ECD centres in providing quality education.

A system could be described as how things are structured and done to achieve predetermined goals. A system is mainly referred to as a group of components that work together to achieve a common purpose or objective.<sup>6</sup> In this study, a system refers to the structures built by the ECD centres to guide and support them in providing quality education. Extensive studies have researched quality early childhood education and components of quality input in terms of structural and process aspects.<sup>7,8</sup> Structural quality is referred to as input that is easily observed and measurable in determining quality, such as ECD centre facilities and resources, ECD practitioner to child ratio and ECD practitioner qualifications, training and wages.<sup>7,9</sup> Process quality describes the nature of interactions between the children and teachers, amongst children and amongst adults, such as practitioners, parents, staff, and leadership and pedagogy.<sup>10</sup> Both structural and process components are essential inputs at the ECD centres that determine quality service delivery. However, there is a scarcity of studies on the systems that support ECD centres in establishing structural and process quality input, which will assist them in offering quality education.

Without effective systems in place, it will be challenging to offer quality education to young children, which is essential as the foundation of education. Policies are necessary to build systems and define the rules, regulations, procedures and protocols that schools require to run smoothly, safely and to deliver quality education. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the existing systems that supported ECD centres in offering quality education by exploring the policies, finance and management quality of the selected ECD centres. Exploring the policies, finance and management quality could help identify aspects to guide schools and support their system building for quality education. Hence, the research question to address the aim of the study is, 'How do policies in ECD centres enhance the operational systems in sustaining quality education?'

Theoretical perspectives for the study are provided next, followed by a description of the framework for ecological and system-level settings and cross-cutting quality dimensions.<sup>11</sup> Britto, Yoshikawa and Boller's framework facilitated the incorporation of ecological system rates with efficient cross-cutting dimensions. The level of ecological systems is split into two settings and systems and five dimensions of quality that cut across and impact the system at different levels. This framework provides the lens to explore and discuss the systems available at the four selected registered ECD centres

chosen as research sites, leading to a discussion of the implications of these findings for the ECD sector.

## A review of related literature

Literature regarding factors that support system building such as policies, finance, management and leadership quality is relevant in this study. The theoretical framework underpinning the research is also discussed.

Policy formulation is the first factor that forms the basis for system building. The common purposes of enacting these policies are to ensure that quality education is provided for young children through relevant systems available at the ECD centres. For example, Manyike<sup>12</sup> refers to this role by stating that the 'government's objective in policies enactment is to promote equal access and quality education for all children living in South Africa' (p. 594).<sup>12</sup> Lazzari et al.<sup>13</sup> added that government policies need to be designed in consultation with stakeholders to realise the aim of education as a right for all children. Indeed, several educational policies related to early childhood were established, but it seems that the enacted policies have not achieved their purposes – improving quality education. This failing is as a result of the findings of Atmore<sup>3</sup> (p. 10), who states that 'while the ECD policy reflected in Education White Paper 5 has created Grade R and significantly increased access to Grade R, it has been less successful in improving quality'.<sup>14</sup> Atmore<sup>3</sup> further states that the ECD policy was designed with little political support and leadership, and that the implementation plans that are available are poor. The question to ask is whether the enacted policies are the problem or the ECD centres not taking advantage of the policies to support themselves in building a system to facilitate quality education.

Management and leadership quality is the second factor that is likely to influence the application of and responsiveness to policies that guide staffing issues, supervision and the organisational climate.<sup>15</sup> The astute management and innovative leadership skills of ECD managers will influence the running of these centres. However, the literature reveals a lack of adequate management systems and structured monitoring and evaluation instruments to guide the operation of ECD centres.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Atmore<sup>3</sup> states that there is often a lack of appropriate management and administrative systems at community-based ECD centres. The implication of improper management and leadership skills of the managers and teachers at the centre will prevent the establishment of systems and structures that should enhance provision of quality education. Hence, this study sought to understand the ECD centres' management and leadership ability in system building.

Lack of funding is the third factor that could prevent the ECD centres' ability to build a system to improve the provision of quality education. Financial resources play a role in system building, and a lack of financial resources negates the attainment of any goal, including system building. However, a worse scenario would be when available funds are

mismanaged.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Bachelet<sup>18</sup> stated that very 'few countries have national frameworks for the financing, coordinating, and providing ECD programmes for young children' (p. 4).<sup>18</sup> Shonkoff<sup>19</sup> confirms that the:

Education for All Dakar Declaration (UNESCO), the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (United Nations) and the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health have identified early childhood education as a specific component in their funding strategies (p. 365).<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, it appears that for many governments, the pre-primary sector of the education system is the one that is least likely to receive much-needed investment for the delivery of quality education.<sup>3,20</sup> Therefore, a lack of funds and a system to manage the available funds will affect the quality of education provided. Therefore, ECD centres need to have systems that will guide and support them in financial management, leading to quality education. The theoretical framework that guided this study in reimagining the existing system at the selected centres is presented next.

## Theoretical framework

The Britto, Yoshikawa and Boller<sup>11</sup> framework for ecological and system-level settings and cross-cutting quality dimensions, as depicted in Figure 1, guided this study.

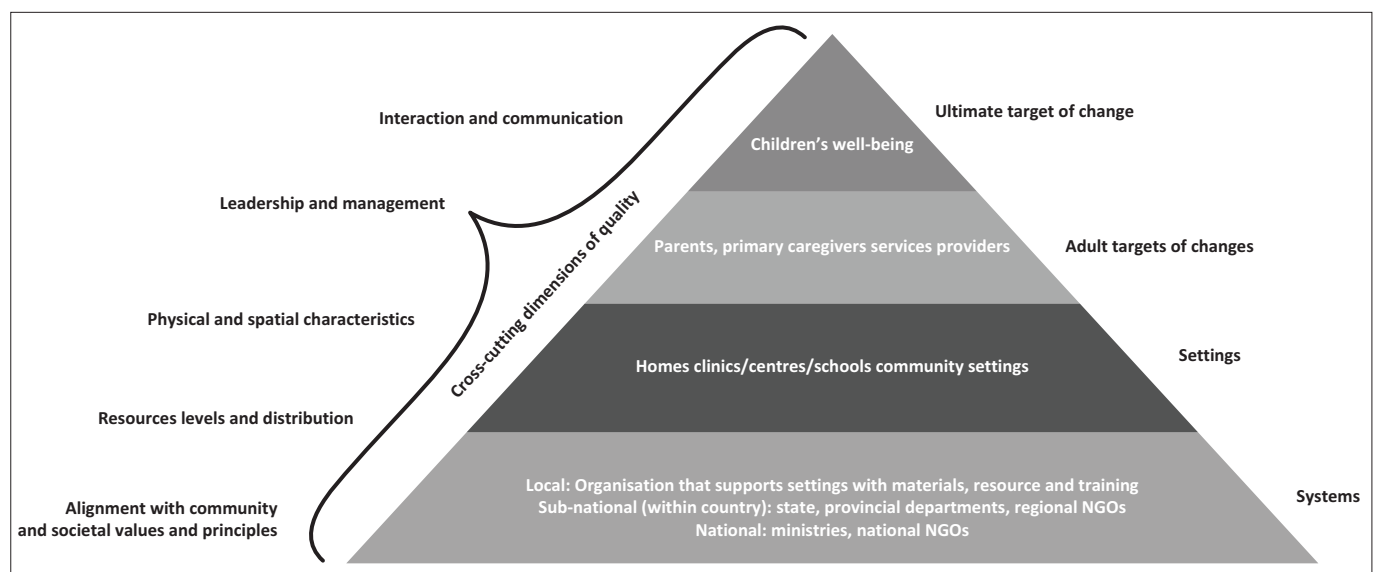
The relevant systems refer to the larger organisational and institutional systems within which ECD centres exist,<sup>11</sup> including the local support systems, subnational support systems and national systems. The framework is used because it explores features that will enhance quality in early childhood education.<sup>11</sup> It also indicates support systems that can help ECD centres provide quality education. For example, the research asserts that accessibility and quality characteristics must be discussed at a higher level than the ECD internal system to facilitate sustainable and meaningful progress in

ECD education in developing countries.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this study aims to reimagine features such as the policies, finance, management and leadership ability of ECD centres in building systems that will sustain them in offering quality education.

Furthermore, research suggests that a comprehensive view of quality ECCE should include ecological standards outside the ECD centre environments also on a broader systems level.<sup>11</sup> This study implies that the ECD centres should not depend solely on the internally generated system but should also take advantage of support systems from their immediate community at the regional, provincial, national and international levels. In summary, the Britto, Yoshikawa and Boller framework brings to light that the existence of systems, such as policies both internally and externally generated, and active involvement of relevant stakeholders would enhance the quality of education and care provided in ECD centres. The chosen framework guided the researchers to understand the selected ECD centres' situation through leading questions used during the data collection process explained in the following section.<sup>11</sup>

## Methodology

A qualitative approach to research through the interpretive paradigm was used in this study because the study's focus was on providing detailed information and in-depth descriptions of existing systems that support ECD in offering quality education.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, multiple case studies permit the selection of several cases, which proves advantageous as they highlight the differences amongst many.<sup>22</sup> Although the study was not designed to be comparative, it was realised that getting data from a variety of situations would enhance the study's findings and contribution. Hence, this study adopted a multiple case study research design using a sample of four registered ECD centres – two from the township areas and two from the



Source: Britto PR, Yoshikawa H, Boller K. Quality of early childhood development programs in global contexts: Rationale for investment, conceptual framework and implications for equity and commentaries. Soc Policy Rep. 2011 Jun;25(2):1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2011.tb00067.x>

FIGURE 1: Ecological and system-level settings and cross-cutting quality dimension.

**TABLE 1:** Biographic information of centres and participants.

Centre location	Participants (pseudonyms)	Position in centre	Age (years)	Years of experience in ECD centre
Centre A township	PeaceT	Principal	32	4 in current centre
	JoyT	Practitioner	42	4 in current centre
Centre B township	KindnessT	Principal	36	5 in current centre
	GreatnessT	Practitioner	30	6 in current centre
Centre C suburban	SmartS	Principal	61	14 in other centres 25 in current centre
	HumbleS	Practitioner	61	18 in another centre 12 in current centre
Centre D suburban	PerseveranceS	Principal	46	6 in another centre 3 in current centre
	ExcelS	Practitioner	29	6 in another centre 1 in current centre

ECD, early childhood development.

suburbs area – of Pretoria, Gauteng province, South Africa. Table 1 shows the biographical information of the selected centres and participants.

Face-to-face, semi-structured individual interviews were used to collect data from eight purposively selected participants from the chosen registered ECD centres. The participants include four ECD centre principals and four teachers. The selected participants were expected to have a job experience of at least three years in their present post. They were expected to have a level of experience and knowledge that would foster answering the research questions.<sup>23</sup> The interview sessions were audio-recorded to obtain a verbatim record of the interaction and provide material for reliability checks.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the researcher took notes to capture the body language of the participants. The researcher triangulated the data by using document analysis along with the interview response. Documents could be a rich source of data because they record and retain evidence.<sup>25</sup> This study analysed the participating centres' daily programme plan, admission policy and staff policy.

Data analysis was done thematically through transcribing data and familiarising ourselves with the data. Codes were generated after which subthemes were formulated; themes were then established and guided by the research question and the theoretical framework. The thematic analysis aimed to identify significant themes and provide answers about the phenomenon under study. The researcher observed ethical principles by initially obtaining clearance to conduct the research from the relevant bodies – the University Ethics Committee and the Department of Social Development. Before the data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights to withdraw from the study at any point in time.<sup>24</sup> Pseudonyms or codes were used to conceal the participants' true identities to ensure the non-disclosure of information about the ECD centres and the participants.<sup>26</sup>

## Findings and discussion

The data generated stemmed from the participants' existing system that guided them in the day-to-day

running of the centre. Therefore, their description of these systems was gleaned from the national policy, the centres' admission policy, employment policy and financial systems. Hence, the themes that emerged related to the knowledge and implementation of national policies, managing people through internal policies and managing and controlling the financial system. The findings are discussed under the knowledge and implementation of national policies, managing people through internal policies and management of financial systems sections.

### Knowledge and implementation of national policies

Several government policies that registered ECD centres can adopt will help build a solid system to achieve the ECD objectives. Unfortunately, the participants could not relate to most ECD policies, such as *Education White Paper 5, National Integrated Plan for ECD* and the *National Early Learning Development Standard (NELDS)*. The data revealed that the participating ECD centres (especially the township centres) have little knowledge of some of the National ECD policies. Thus, they could not structure a practicable system that will help them attain high quality in early childhood education. JoyT said, 'I know that we use the Government policies, but I don't know their names'. In addition, KindnessT stated, 'I have not heard of NELDS, NCF and National Norms and Standards for [an] ECD centre, but I have read about the *Children's Rights and Responsibility Acts*'.

On the positive side, the participants demonstrated fair knowledge of National Norms and Standards for ECD. Section 79(2) of the *Children's Amendment Act (No. 41, 2007)* sets out the requirements for the registration of ECD centres.<sup>27</sup> These requirements are known as the 11 National Norms and Standards that must be maintained in ECD centres. 'Participants' responses are indicated under the 'Managing people through internal policies' section:

SmartS: 'I read all the policies we received from the Department of Education. We receive them from time to time, like the ECD policy, the guidelines for preschools, the principal's guidelines, and everything we need to know. We follow the Government policies by ensuring that children eat good food and are safe all the time.' (Principal, 61 years old, from suburban centre, 39 years of experience in ECD centre)

ExcelS: 'I read from the National Norms and Standards document where they said kids have the right to safety, to drink clean water, to be cared for, and also how we need to manage the toilet facilities. In my classroom, safety is my main priority because parents rely on us for the safety of their kids.' (practitioner, 29 years old, 7 years of experience in ECD centre)

The data analysis revealed that participants from the suburban centres displayed more knowledge of ECD national policies and adapted them to develop a system on how to plan effectively for the teaching of young children. However, the township centres did not display good

knowledge of national policies which might affect the quality of education provided to young children in their centre. This finding shows that the township participants could not establish a practicable system that could guide them in providing quality education from the national policies as they are not aware of the policies' existence. As a result, it contradicts Neuman and Devercelli's<sup>28</sup> statement that a 'robust ECD system should include policies that support programs in all essential sectors and target all groups (e.g., pregnant women, infants and toddlers, preschoolers and caregivers)' (p. 15).<sup>28</sup> Hence, there is a need for adequate and necessary support from the government on training and development regarding awareness and implementation of national policies. This finding at the township ECD centres is also contrary to research suggestions that ECD centres should get training and support from local, provincial or national governments.<sup>11</sup> These suggestions are supported by the view that ECD teachers' and principals' training will lead to staff competence.<sup>29</sup> The township centres' participants' lack of understanding of how the national policies should guide the ECD processes would deprive them of obtaining maximum results through quality learning; this situation demands urgent, intensive, practical and continuous training. Sufficient training regarding understanding and application of national policies in building systems to facilitate quality learning is essential.

### Managing people through internal policies

The findings reveal that the participating ECD centres built a system on managing people through their internally generated policies such as the admission policy and employment policy. Most ECD centres usually develop their operational systems from internally generated policies and procedures to support functions such as hiring practitioners, contacting parents and using the centre's resources. These policies function as a system on how things should be done regarding specific actions for specific situations. The participants described their internal policies such as the admission policy, health policy and employment policy:

PeaceT: 'We have an admission policy and an admission form that parents fill in. It contains the child's details, parents' details, child's immunisation details, and who is going to bring and fetch the child. We also have a "sick" policy – when the child is sick in our centre; we call the parents to come to fetch them.' (Principal; 32 years old; 4 years of experience in ECD centre)

SmartS: 'In the admission policy, parents will get to know the rules and regulations of the centre, such as commencing and closing times, due dates for fee payment. In the admission form, the parents fill in their child's name and date of birth.' (Principal, 61 years old, from suburban centre, 39 years of experience in ECD centre)

JoyT: 'From the admission policy, I learnt about the "sick" policy that we must not give a sick child medication from the centre, but we must inform the parent if a child is sick. And when a parent brings medicine, there should be agreement between the practitioner and the parent to give medicine to the child.' (Practitioner; 42 years old; 4 years of experience in ECD centre)

The data revealed that all the centres have admission policies given to parents after their children are registered at the centre. The admission policy serves to orientate the parents about what to expect from the centre and what is expected from the parents, such as their rights and responsibilities. This policy implies that if both parties (parents and ECD centre) keep to the terms of the admission policy, there is potential for a good relationship that directly impacts the quality of education available for young children. The findings regarding the use of admission policy to build a system of effective management and communication with parents disagree with some researchers such as Atmore<sup>3</sup> and Mbarathi et al.<sup>16</sup> There is a lack of adequate management systems structured to monitor the operation of ECD centres. The differences in the findings could be a result of the context of the studies. Whilst the present study is conducted in suburban and township ECD centres, studies of Atmore<sup>3</sup> and Mbarathi et al.<sup>16</sup> were conducted in the rural centres.

Another system built by the participating ECD centres to display their management ability is the employment policy. It stipulates the terms and conditions of service of the staff at the ECD centres. The participants expressed the following:

PeaceT: 'We also have an employment policy. Here the dress code is included which we must abide by. Also, our values, we have to be honest, clean and disciplined.' (Principal; 32 years old; 4 years of experience in ECD centre)

HumbleS: 'We have a work policy where one of the conditions is that you don't have to use your phone during classes, and you don't have to shout at the kids. We, as the staff, should not engage in conflicts because it is not healthy for the kids. Also, the late coming of staff and many other rules are stipulated in this policy.' (Practitioner; 61 years old; 30 years of experience in ECD centre)

ExcelS: 'We have many rules here. The first one is about the dress code; the practitioners must not wear clothes that will expose their bodies. Secondly, practitioners must respect parents. Also, language, we must speak politely to the children, to staff and to parents. We are not allowed to use cell phone during school hours.' (practitioner, 29 years old, 7 years of experience in ECD centre)

Table 2 displays the analysis of the participating centres' admission policy, health policy and employment policy to corroborate participants' responses about internal policies used at the centres.

The internal policy documents provided by the participating centres revealed that they operate differently in terms of interpersonal relationships, communication, salaries of personnel, daily activities, nutrition and access to health benefits. These differences are as a result of resources that they possess – especially the management and leadership style. Notably, the principal and practitioners at the centres are the primary resources because their innovative and creative capabilities will enable them to build systems for connecting and accessing support from the external environment.

Management and leadership capacity are critical components for making decisions such as resource allocation, managing people, detecting training needs and communicating with

**TABLE 2:** Document analysis of admission, health and employment policies.

Policy document or centres	Township centre A	Township centre B	Suburban centre C	Suburban centre D
Admission policy	It contains general information such as the details of parents and children, school hours, documents needed for enrolment, school fees for the different age groups, the due date for school fees payment.	It contains general information such as the details of parents and children, school hours, documents needed for enrolment, school fees for the different age groups, the due date for school fees payment.	It contains general information such as centres A and B but includes a clause like 15% interest added to the outstanding fees. It contains the menu roster.	It contains general information such as centres A and B but includes if fees are not paid by the 7th of the month; for more than 2 months in a row, 1-day notice will be given to the child, to leave the school. It contains the menu roster.
Health policy	It provides general information such as that medication will be administered with parental consent; medicines will be labelled with the child's name on it and kept in the fridge.	It provides general information such as that medication will be administered with parents' consent; medicine will be labelled with the child's name and then kept in the fridge.	It provides more information than the general information provided in centres A, B and D. The Tshwane Municipal Clinic visits the school during special health campaigns, dental clinic visits and speech therapy visits.	It provides general information such as that medication will be administered with consent from a parent, and medicines will be labelled with the child's name and kept in the fridge.
Employment policy	This is also referred to as staff policy. It does not provide detailed employment information but provides the standard of performance. Practitioners must be honest, no child abuse, no conflict at work, no alcohol at work, no use of phone, always be prepared for the daily programme.	It could not provide employment policy.	It contains general employment details such as salary, leave, job description, performance standard, punctuality, children, other staff members and parents.	It contains general employment details such as salary, leave, job description, performance standard, punctuality, children, other staff members and parents.

parents and community members.<sup>11</sup> From the participants' responses, it appears that both the township and suburban participating centres have built a system to manage communication and relationships amongst staff members and between staff members and the parents. However, this study does not deliberate on the details of how effective these internal policies are. The reasons were time constraints, and interviewing parents and learners was beyond the study's ethics code and scope.

## Management and control of financial systems

Financial resources are at the root of achieving any worthwhile goal, including quality ECCE enhancement when properly managed. Hence, I sought to understand how the participating ECD centres receive funds and how such funds are managed and directed towards promoting quality ECCE. The participants responded as follows:

PeaceT: 'The DSD gives stipends for food and also subsidises our salaries.' (Principal; 32 years old; 4 years of experience in ECD centre)

KindnessT: 'Government funding is usually allocated yearly. We usually submit our papers in terms of the Constitution, and they give us money quarterly.' (Principal; 36 years old; 5 years of experience at ECD centre)

PerseveranceS: 'Our source of income is through fee payments from the parents, with no financial support from the government.' (Principal; 46 years old; 9 years of experience at ECD centre)

SmartS: 'We do not get any form of financial support or assistance from the government.' (Principal; 61 years old from suburban centre; 39 years of experience in ECD centre)

The findings reveal that the participating township centres receive financial support from the government. The suburban centres do not receive any form of government financial assistance but solely rely on school fees paid by the parents. The funding received from the government by the township ECD centres confirms suggestions that ECD centres should get support from provincial departments.<sup>11</sup> Despite the financial support received by the township ECD centres, it appears that they still have financial

challenges. The township financial challenges are that because of the parents in the township centres' low economic status, there was a challenge of delayed or non-payment of fees because of no system for fee collection being in place, which was not the case at suburban centres. Participants explained this:

KindnessT: 'We have too many financial challenges because parents are not paying on time, so we get paid late, and this causes demotivation. This is a huge problem because we get our salary sometimes on the 7<sup>th</sup> of the month.' (Principal; 36 years old; 5 years of experience in ECD centre)

GreatnessT: 'Sometime[s] parents pay late, and that means I also get my salary late. And this occurs often, which is very demotivating. These are our financial challenges.' (Practitioner; 30 years old; 6 years of experience at ECD centre)

PeaceT: 'Some parents pay and some do not pay. We call meeting for non-paying parents. Some do not have good reasons as they just want to use the school, but some have genuine reasons because they are not working so we say bring the child, and when you have the money, you can come and pay.' (Principal; 32 years old; 4 years of experience in ECD centre)

This finding concurs with Baka<sup>30</sup> who discovered in his study on financial management literacy of ECD centre managers in Mafikeng that financial management challenges at ECD centres are late or non-payment of school fees which led to delay in payment of staff. On a contrary note, the suburban centres in this study sometimes also experience some of their parents not making prompt payment of fees, but they ensure that parents make payment when due. The practitioners responded as follows:

PerseveranceS: 'Some of the parents struggle to pay fees. I try to persuade them to make payment through phone calls, emails, and if I see them, I talk to them personally to find out why they have not yet paid. I must say most of my parents respond.' (Principal; 46 years old; 9 years of experience at ECD centre)

SmartS: 'We put posters by the gate saying it's the week for paying school fees. We use newsletters at the end of the month reminding them. We also send WhatsApp messages. Sometimes I stand at the gate with a list showing who has not paid, so we can communicate with the parents, as

communication is critical. Mostly I handle this aspect, and it has been very successful. We don't have many non-paying parents.' (Principal; 61 years old from suburban centre; 39 years of experience in ECD centre)

The data revealed that the parents in township centres are lenient to prompt fee payment. Centres also do not have strict measures to ensure prompt payment as stated by PeaceT ('bring the child, and when you have the money, you can come and pay'). This signifies that no specific policy was communicated to the parents regarding late payment or non-payment of school fees. For example, if a parent fails to pay fees, the ECD centre can refuse further admission of the child. However, this must be in writing, and parents must sign such a document. Although the sympathetic stance by township centres is admirable, it adversely affects the centre's management, especially salary payments, and it demotivates staff. Hence, an effective system for collecting fees will facilitate prompt payment, which will invariably increase the financial resources available to promote quality education.

## Conclusion

The existing systems that guide and support participating ECD centres in offering quality education to young children come in existing national policies, internally generated policies and financial, administrative practices. Participants could not fully utilise the available national ECD policies to build practicable systems around them because of their limited knowledge about the existing national policies (especially at township centres). The recommended ECD teacher training workshops provided by government and tertiary institutions will capacitate them with the appropriate knowledge.

The findings reveal that the participating centres built a system to manage and relate to people through their internal policies such as the admission, medical and employment policy. The content of these policies differs from one centre to another. The internal policies of suburban centres include essential information that helps to identify the quality of service available for the children, such as free health examinations for young children, and for parents to get to know the quality of food given to the children as per menus which are included in the admission policy. Township centres' medical policies do not have such information. Hence, their young children do not enjoy free medical examination, and parents are not informed about the type of food given to their children because no menu was advertised. The differences in the internal policies reveal disparities in service delivery. These differences widen the gap in the provision of education for young children.

The sources of funding in participating centres are mainly school fees and stipends received from the government. The suburban centres charge higher fees, and they ensure that parents pay school fees promptly, whereas the township

centres charge minimal fees. However, the township centres are unable to build effective systems that will ensure that parents make prompt payments. Therefore, they are unable to purchase essential resources and pay practitioners' salaries on time. This delay in payment of practitioners' salaries demotivates them, cascading into the quality of service delivery to young children. The implications of the study for ECD centres (especially township centres) indicate that more essential management or leadership skills that will enhance them to seek support and build operational systems from their ecological system as recommended by Britto et al.<sup>11</sup> are required to enhance the quality of education provided.

An effective system is essential at all levels of education, especially at the foundation stage of learning. This study brought to light the existing systems at the very starting stage of education (ECD centre) and the challenges faced in different contexts (township and suburban centre). For young children to enjoy quality education through effective systems at their various early learning centres, it has become urgent for the government to develop effective strategies to make national ECD policies more accessible to ECD practitioners in township centres. The government should encourage uniformity in the contents of the internal policies used at various ECD centres irrespective of the location. Similar internal policies can help improve the provision of equal access of young children to quality ECCE. It is also recommended that practical and continuous training should be made available to the ECD principals regarding building effective management and financial systems. Early childhood development principals both at the township and suburban centres are also encouraged to enrol for short courses on system development in schools. The development and growth of ECD principals' skills regarding system building will place them in a better position to create structures and systems in their centres to smooth the running of the centre and equally offer quality education for the younger children.

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## Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Authors' contribution

A.Y.A and K.B. equally contributed to this research article. A.Y.A was the doctoral student, and K.B. was the supervisor and wrote the article from A.Y.A.'s thesis.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (clearance number: EC 18/11/02).

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## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

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

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