

An Investigation of Practical Skills Competencies of Early Childhood Care and Education Programmes

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ABSTRACT

Childhood Development training does not guarantee quality provisioning in ECD centres for several reasons: a lack of proficient instruction during training; a lack of support to help assist the students with work; a lack of knowledge; and a lack of follow-up support after the training is complete to ensure constant implementation. That is why it is necessary to educate practitioners and to continuously supervise their progress to ensure that they implement the appropriate activities relevant to their daily programmes for children to reach their full potential. This study considers the perceptions of five ECCE practitioners based in Gauteng who completed a Higher Certificate in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme at a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) in South Africa. The study will focus on Health, Safety and Nutrition, which forms part of the ECCE programme. A qualitative research approach was utilized. Semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis through triangulation for this study were developed according to the criteria of the Experiential Learning Theory for the assessment of the themes from the study. A case study of narrative approach was used to explore reflections and authentic experiences the practitioners endure. This was executed to consider if the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes are sufficient for real-world applications. Furthermore, to ascertain the transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners into ECD centres and to establish if the insights and skills training has equipped these practitioners for an ECD centre. The hands-on practical skills training competencies in early learning before entering an ECD centre as a practitioner will inform the development of future programmes as well as policy.

keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education, in-service teachers, teaching practice, Private Higher Education Institution, higher certificate

1. Introduction and Background

The National Department of Education defines early childhood development (ECD) as the processes by which children from birth to nine years of age grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially (DoE, 2001a). It is important for participants working within ECD centers to have sufficient theoretical and practical training before entering the workplace. This standard also applies to the early childhood education (ECE) sector, practitioners who care for children from birth through to 4 years of age. Pre-service early childhood care and education (ECCE) practitioners need the beginning knowledge, skills and applied competencies that are critical for facilitation at the ECD level. ECCE training is intended to provide students with “basic introductory knowledge, cognitive and conceptual tools and practical techniques to enable them to render quality service within the ECD centers and to further study in ECD” (DHET, 2017: 24). This study aims to investigate the quality

offered in ECD centers with an intentional focus on the experiences and perceptions pertaining to practical integration and application challenges experienced by ECCE practitioners who have obtained a Higher Certificate in ECCE qualification at a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI). These graduates are expected to have been prepared with insight and skills that are both employable and relevant to further specialisation study in support of the principles of life-long learning. We have zoned in on the insights and skills that are expected to be gained through an ECCE programme and considered the real-world application thereof.

Access to Early Learning Programmes (ELP) has increased over the past 10 years with 69 percent of 4-year old's attending an ELP in 2018 (Parlementary Monitoring Group PMG, 2020). An ELP was introduced by a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) and implemented as the ECCE qualification in 2020 at an entry-level/introductory qualification (NQF level 5) to the study of ECD education. The ECCE qualification offers both theoretical and practical training for one year (PMG, 2020). The study considers the training received through the lens of the real-world ECD context asking questions such as: are the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes sufficient for real-world applications? What is the transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners into ECD centres? What are the physical skills training competencies in early learning before entering an ECD centre as a practitioner?

2. Problem Statement

Many newly trained practitioners do not always provide quality education to children attending an ECD centre due to a lack of proficient instruction during training; a lack of support to help assist the students with work; a lack of knowledge; and a lack of follow-up support after the training is complete to ensure constant implementation (Harrison, 2020). According to Atmore, Van Niekerk, & Ashley-Cooper (2012) an ECCE qualification does not necessarily guarantee quality teaching and learning. That is why it is essential to educate practitioners and to constantly supervise their progress to make sure they implement the appropriate activities in their daily programmes for children to reach their full potential. We are further cognizant that before the practitioners enter the working world, the ECD sector and ECD centers also encounter several challenges that might impact the success and smooth transition from student to practitioner (Harrison, 2020). According to (Visser, Grossmark, Krüger, Smith, van Zyl, Willemse, & Wright, 2021), there is an increase in challenges and demands that have been placed on the ECD sector and will be considered within the Literature review.

3. Literature Review

The literature review will provide a thorough review through the context of the (2.1) ECD centers as well as (2.2) the consideration of ECD programme that emphasizes the need for adequate ECCE training. The practical skills (2.3) that are specialized competencies needed for quality practice for the care and education workforce.

3.1. ECD Centres

ECD is recognised as the foundation for success in future learning. Quality ELPs prepare children for adulthood, providing them with the necessary opportunities for social, cognitive, spiritual, physical, and emotional development (Visser et al., 2021). International countries, including South Africa, are focused on investing in quality ECD. These countries have noticed the importance of providing quality ECD for all children to encourage lifelong learning. The Department of Social Development (DSD) was responsible for the cohort from birth to four

years of age but within South Africa, a migration of this cohort has occurred as the National Department of Education (DBE) is currently responsible for the cohort (Banda, 2022). With the migration major concerns around ECD data according to the DBE and DSD became apparent. Concerns around infrastructure, transition to DSD, and the quality of the practitioner were emphasised (Banda, 2022). According to the research done by DBE emphasis is placed on the importance of conceptualising, measuring, and improving quality in ECD centers. The DSD (2015) mentioned specific challenges that are provident in ECD and must be resolved. These challenges include poor diets for children from under-resourced circumstances, no involvement from caregivers, and unqualified practitioners, the quality of education provided to these children are not up to standard, and also poor support for children with special needs (Visser et al., 2021). The challenges have a negative impact on the quality of ECD education provided to children and also puts children at risk of not reaching their full potential. This study focuses on the quality provisioning provided at ECD centres through the practitioners.

3.2. The Expectation of ECD Programmes

ECD programmes are expected to ensure that all children are sufficiently protected and receive a quality education by practitioners with the correct training and qualifications. ECD programmes are offered to children between the ages of 0 to 4 years old (Steyn, Harris & Hartell, 2014). However, for many younger than five years old, in South Africa, ECD programmes are inadequate and inaccessible. According to Visser et al., (2021) one of the main reasons is that the majority of ECD programmes are not aligned with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), with poorly trained practitioners. The NCF must be accurately implemented by ECD centres to maintain quality assurance of ECD programmes and ensure that all children in SA have access to quality ECD centres (Mathwasa & Shumba, 2020). ECD programmes need to focus on the following areas to provide quality provisioning, teaching and learning, infrastructure, health, safety and nutrition, and children with disabilities. The area of teaching and learning will focus on qualified practitioners, where all practitioners need to go for formal training to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to work at an ECD centre. The infrastructure is one of the most essential requirements, as it needs to adhere to the standards of an ECD centre. Inclusivity of all children in ECD programmes is essential as it forms part of a child's basic rights. Health, safety and nutrition plays a core role in teaching and learning at an ECD centre. ECD centres need to provide the correct nutrition to children for them to be able to reach their full potential. Many South African children come from under resourced circumstances and do not have access to basic nutrition. ECCE practitioners need to be trained with the practical skills necessary to be able to address this challenge (Mathwasa & Shumba, 2020). For the purposes of this study, we will specifically focus on the training ECCE practitioners receive regarding health, safety and nutrition.

3.3. Practical Skills: Specialised Competencies Needed for Quality Practice for the Care and Education Workforce

Practical skills such as shared core knowledge and competencies are needed by practitioners who work with children between the ages of 0 – 4 years old at an ECD centre (Mampane, 2021). These specialised competencies also include excellent leadership and communication skills the ability to relate well with children to foster their development educationally and socially, organisational and planning skills, experience in the delivery of suitable curriculum in early education settings, ability to assess children's progress and keep records as appropriate, capable of working under pressure and managing time well to ensure the needs of the children are met, adaptive in making the classroom suitable for each child's needs, innovative in using different methods of working with the children to give them a holistic education, practical skills

to deliver child health, exercise and nutrition and excellent at looking after the physical care of the children (Garifullina & Garifullina, 2019; Desmond et al., 2019). These practical skills should be integrated into an early learning programme, to prepare the students to provide quality provisioning as a practitioner working at an ECD centre. The study focuses on the practical skills of qualified ECCE practitioners and their experiences and perceptions regarding the training that they have received, specifically focusing on Health, Safety and Nutrition.

Below is an analysis of how Health, Safety and Nutrition are integrated into an ECCE qualification, adapted from Marotz (2013). The Table 1 lists the practical skills that the training expects students to acquire. These abilities were used to determine whether the activities included in this early learning program are adequate for real-world applications.

Table 1.

Health, Safety and Nutrition in an ECCE qualification

Health, Safety and Nutrition integrated into the ECCE qualification	Practical Skills
Children's health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childcare • Child development • Special education • Creating a nurturing environment • Customer service • Music
Create and maintain safe and hygienic learning environments both inside and outside the classroom, drawing on knowledge of effective health and safety practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduling
Meet children's essential nutritional needs through thoughtful meal planning and educating them about good nutritional habits and food safety.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesson planning • Progress reports
Pedagogy to develop children's overall well-being?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduling • Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)

Adapted from Marotz (2013)

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Questions

- Are the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes sufficient and adequate for real world applications?
- What is the transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners into ECD centres?
- What are the skills obtained through the Health, Safety and Nutrition training?
- What are the physical skills training competencies in early learning prior to entering an ECD centre as a practitioner?

4.2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to add to the development of HCCE programmes and ECD practitioner experiences. To meet the general aim of the study the following objectives need to be accomplished:

- To investigate if hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes are sufficient and adequate for real world applications.
- To ascertain the ease or transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners into ECD

centres.

- To establish the physical skills training competencies in early learning prior to entering an ECD centre as a practitioner.

4.3. Research Design

For the purpose of this study a qualitative research approach was used. This approach helped the researcher to give ECCE practitioners a chance to express their opinions and perceptions about practical integration and application challenges experienced by ECCE practitioners (Gerring, 2017). An instrumental case study of narrative approach (Abawi, 2013) was used which relies on qualitative data collection methods. This approach was used to collect data from the participants in order to retell the story.

4.4. Research Sample

The study was executed in Gauteng with a convenience sample of five ECCE practitioners currently employed at different ECD centers and graduated with an Early Childhood, Care and Education qualification at a PHEI (Maree, 2007). These practitioners were conveniently selected to be part of the research study and the selection process was not intimidating.

4.5. Methods of Data Collection

Data was collected through triangulation using semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis. According to Lynch, Spillane, House, Peters-Burton, Behrend, Ross, & Han (2017) an instrumental case study provide an understanding into a specific problem, it also helps to adjust and make changes to the specific problem at hand. It highlights the challenges that the participants experience as newly qualified ECCE practitioners (Lynch et al., 2017). A narrative approach was used to measure the physical skills-driven components that are theoretically elaborated but not sufficiently practically applicable within early learning (Urquhart, 2013)

4.5.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a data collection method that uses open-ended questions to ask participants a variety of questions. These open-ended questions could be followed by probing questions to understand the participants perceptions and opinions regarding the practical integration and challenges experienced by the participants (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Semi-structured interviews are most effective when the researcher's main aim is to have a better understanding of the participants' perceptions (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). These interviews were used to collect data from the pre-service practitioners to answer the research questions.

4.5.2. Observations

Observation involves the technique to observe participants behavior in their own natural setting (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The researcher will only record the findings of the observation and will not engage in any interaction with the participants. This study will use observations as the complementary method, as the semi-structured interview will be used as the main data collection method (Ciesielska, Boström, & Öhlander, 2018). Within this study the observer will take on the role as partially participating observer. The aim here is to learn more about the participants' behavior and norms without becoming a burden (Ciesielska et al., 2018). Observations took place during lecture sessions and during the pre-service practitioners practical training.

4.5.3. Document Analysis

Document analysis was also used in this study as a qualitative data collection method. It includes the interpretation of specific documents to clarify them and to gain a better understanding of these documents (Karppinen, & Moe, 2012). Document analysis is used to find a relevant document and to provide an appropriate explanation of the content within the document (Karppinen & Moe, 2012). For the purposes of this study the Health, Safety and Nutrition module guide from a PHEI was used. The document analysis was based on the first three themes; Hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes, Transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners and Skills obtained through the Health, Safety and Nutrition training.

4.6. Data Analysis

The study made use of thematic coding to analyse the data that was collected from the participants (Berg, 2007). Thematic coding was used to organise the different ideas and perceptions of the ECCE practitioners. It is a flexible and widely used approach for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns and themes within qualitative data. It allows for a systematic and rigorous exploration of the participants' perspectives and experiences related to the practical skills they have obtained at the PHEI in preparing them to work at an ECCE centre. Initial codes were used to generate and capture meaningful segments of data that links to the research objectives (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). These codes were organized into themes that were used to answer the research questions. The themes that emerged from the study and that was used to organize the data are the following, hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes, transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners, physical skills training competencies in early learning and skills obtained through the Health, Safety and Nutrition training. These themes were used to record the different views and perceptions of the participants and a short case study of each individual case was generated (Nowell et al., 2017). Code names were used for each participant to protect their identities (Ibbett & Brittain, 2020). The code names were also used to organize the data and made analysing of the data easier. As the sample size were small, the researchers used the following code names for the five participants, in no particular order: Practitioner 1, Practitioner 2, Practitioner 3, Practitioner 4 and Practitioner 5 (Ibbett, & Brittain, 2020). The results of the study were presented through a case study of narrative approach. The above-mentioned themes that arose assisted the researcher to write a story for each ECCE practitioner's perceptions and opinions.

A narrative approach forms part of qualitative research in which the stories will become the raw data (Butler-Kisber, 2010). The approach was used to learn more about different human experiences. concerning this study the researchers focused on the ECCE practitioners and their real-life experiences within the ECD centres (Butler-Kisber, 2010) as displayed in Figure 1.

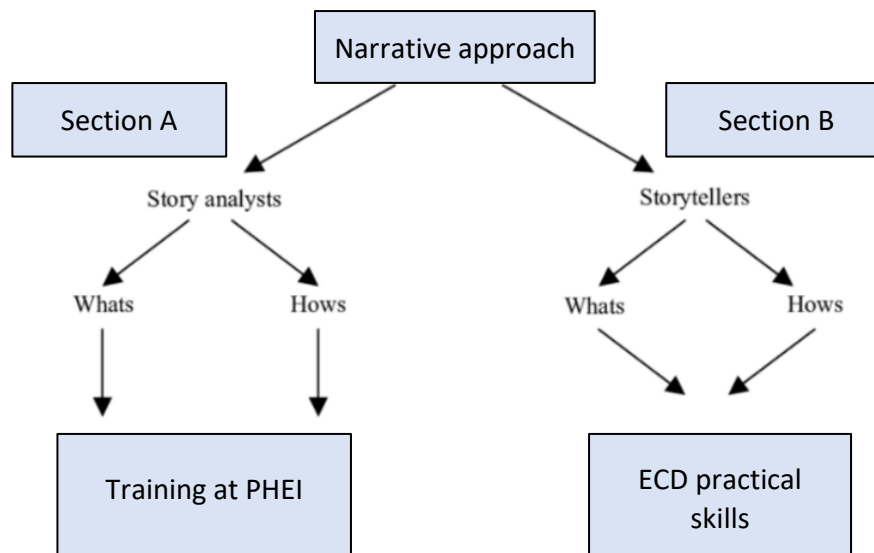


Figure 1. A Typology of narrative approach adapted from Smith (2008)

About Figure 1, the story analysis (section A of the narrative approach) was based on the students' perceptions and opinions about the training they received at the PHEI. The storytellers (section B of the narrative approach) focused on the qualified ECCE practitioners' perceptions and experiences at an ECD centre. The thematic themes were divided between section A and section B, as discussed within the results section.

5. Theoretical Framework

The Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) was used in this study as the theoretical framework and is defined by Kolb (1984) as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Here knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience through abstract conceptualisation and transforming experience through active experimentation and and reflective observation as illustrated in Figure 2.

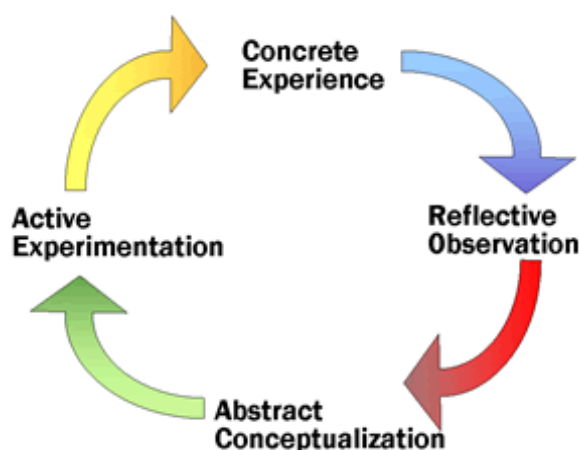


Figure 2. The Experiential Learning Cycle (1984)

The semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis for this study were developed according to the criteria of the ELT theoretical framework for the assessment of the themes from the study. In this study the cycle started with an experience that the student has had at an ECD center, followed by an opportunity to reflect on that experience. Then students conceptualized and draw conclusions about what they experienced and observed in the ECD

environment. Thereafter, consideration is given to future actions in which the students experiment with various behaviours. Through the ELT as a theoretical framework, the participant's perceptions and opinions regarding their experiences could be collated and analysed for this study.

6. Results

The findings of the study have been analysed according to the criteria of the narrative approach which includes the story analysis and storytellers. A story was written for each theme to capture the findings of the participants by using triangulation.

6.1. Story Analysis

The story analysis as in Section A is focused on the ECCE student's perception of the training received at a PHEI. The following themes emerged from the narrative approach of story analysis such as theme 1. hands-on activities in ELP; theme 2. transition difficulty; theme 3. and skills obtained through the Health, Safety, and Nutrition training. These themes were used to answer the research questions.

6.1.1. Theme 1

The following research question was addressed. Are the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes sufficient and adequate for real world applications? The theme was executed to consider if the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes are sufficient for real-world applications.

The **semi-structured interviews** revealed the following.

Practitioner 1: *"Need more training with hands-on activities. Teaching Experience prepared me for the real world. Semester one was a lot of theory and Semester two was more practical."*

Practitioner 2: *"Teaching experience prepared me to work with children, gained experience and confidence through TE. Need more practical activities to link the theory."*

Practitioner 3: *"The ECCE qualification prepared me 70% to become a practitioner, theory was helpful, more hands-on activities, Learned a lot through teaching experience."*

Practitioner 4: *"Working with different learners, was very helpful for my classroom, I have more background knowledge about learners and how to manage my class, and mockup the classroom to practice."*

Practitioner 5: *"My previous experience working as an au pair and at an ECD centre prepared me. Need to put theory into practice. Need more guidance to work with parents, staff members and learners."*

The **observations** showed the following.

Practitioner 1: *"More hands-on activities need to be integrated into the module."*

Practitioner 2: *"Theory and practical skills should be linked together during lecture sessions. Theory and practical skills should be linked together during lecture sessions."*

Practitioner 3: *"More hands-on activities should be integrated into the module."*

Practitioner 4: *"A mockup classroom could be used to teach students."*

Practitioner 5: *"The theory and practical aspects of the module should be integrated more."*

6.1.2. Theme 2

The following research question was addressed. What is the transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners into ECD centres? The theme focused on the ease or transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners in ECD centres.

The **semi-structured interviews** revealed the following.

Practitioner 1: *“Communication skills, working with kids with different disabilities, time management skills, patience.”*

Practitioner 2: *“Handling conflict, Communication skills with parents and learners.”*

Practitioner 3: *“Being more assertive with the learners. Communication skills with parents, learners, etc.”*

Practitioner 4: *“Classroom management skills, lesson plans, rotation stations, set up of classroom.”*

Practitioner 5: *“I need patience. It is not easy, and you need to know how to work with the learners, Communication skills.”*

The **observations** showed the following.

Practitioner 1: *“Students need to be trained on students need to be trained on special needs education.”*

Practitioner 2: *“Training on conflict management should be prioritised, as these students need to be equipped on how to deal with parents/caregivers.”*

Practitioner 3: *“Effective communication skills training should be implemented to help prepare the students for the workplace.”*

Practitioner 4: *“Need more experience of the actual classroom setup.”*

Practitioner 5: *“Need to do a workshop on communication skills, especially working with the parents/caregivers.”*

6.1.3. Theme 3

The following research question was addressed. What are the skills obtained through the Health, Safety and Nutrition training? The theme accomplished to consider the skills obtained through the Health, safety and Nutrition training.

The **semi-structured interviews** revealed the following.

Practitioner 1: *“Deal with different injuries, child development, and a lot of theories. Need more practical activities and first aid training.”*

Practitioner 2: *“Safety of children, evacuation methods, types of illnesses, awareness of children’s illnesses, Handling injuries, and first aid training.”*

Practitioner 3: *“The theory was aligned with my teaching experience. Theory helped a lot in my classroom, with different food, allergies, and more hands-on activities.”*

Practitioner 4: *“Need more hands-on activities to prepare us for the classroom, create a safe environment, daily planning and nutrition.”*

Practitioner 5: *“Knowledge about the health and safety of learners. Knowledge about nutrition, and classroom management, to understand learners with different abilities.”*

The **observations** showed the following.

Practitioner 1: *“A variety of skills have been developed. Need more experience.”*

Practitioner 2: *“Different illnesses, injuries and first aid training. The student need more experience to develop these skills obtained.”*

Practitioner 3: *“A variety of skills have been obtained through the theoretical and practical aspects of the module.”*

Practitioner 4: *“A variety of skills have been obtained, need more practical experience.”*

Practitioner 5: *“Need more experience with working with children with special needs and from different backgrounds.”*

6.2. Document Analysis

Further focus on the ECCE student’s perception of the training received at a PHEI is considered through the document analysis and focused on the following emerging themes: theme 1. hands-on activities in ELP; theme 2. transition difficulty; theme 3. and skills obtained through the health, safety, and nutrition training. The data revealed the following:

6.2.1. Theme 1

The link between the theory and practical application needs to be more explicit.

6.2.2. Theme 2

Emphasis on a mockup classroom to be allowed for students to apply or show applications. The students will need more training in the following: Communication skills, classroom management, special needs education, classroom setup and conflict management.

6.2.3. Theme 3

Childcare, Child Development, Special education, Creating a nurturing environment, Customer service, Music, Lesson planning, Progress reports, Scheduling, CPR.

The results of the Data analysis showed that more hands-on activities need to be implemented into the Health, Safety and Nutrition training for practitioners to acquire the practical skills that is essential for their own classrooms.

6.3. Storytellers

The storytellers' responses as in Section B focused on the ECCE practitioner’s perceptions and experiences of working at an ECD centre. The following theme was used to highlight the narrative approach of storyteller's theme 4: physical skills training competencies in early learning.

6.3.1. Theme 4

The following research question was addressed. What are the physical skills training competencies in early learning prior to entering an ECD centre as a practitioner? The following theme was used to establish the physical skills training competencies in early learning before entering an ECD centre as a practitioner.

The **semi-structured interviews** revealed the following.

Practitioner 1: *“Patience during the Teaching experience. Communication skills, working with children with disabilities.”*

Practitioner 2: *“Classroom management skills, being in control of the class, lesson planning,*

and time management skills.”

Practitioner 3: *“Confidence, developed communication skills, and understanding of learner’s development.”*

Practitioner 4: *“Children with different abilities, children’s different needs and development, daily planning, and communication skills.”*

Practitioner 5: *“Developed through the feedback and guidance of other practitioners, Classroom management skills and patience with the learners.”*

The **observations** showed the following.

Practitioner 1: *“Need training in special needs and communication skills.”*

Practitioner 2: *“Need training in classroom management skills.”*

Practitioner 3: *“Need training in communication skills.”*

Practitioner 4: *“Training in special needs and communication skills”*

Practitioner 5: *“Need training in classroom management”*

7. Findings and Discussion

This study made use of the theoretical framework as a lens to unpack the following research questions: Are the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes sufficient and adequate for real world applications? What is the transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners into ECD centres? What are the skills obtained through the Health, Safety and Nutrition training? What are the physical skills training competencies in early learning prior to entering an ECD centre as a practitioner? The semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis for this study were developed according to the criteria of the ELT theoretical framework for the assessment of the themes from the study. Through the ELT as a theoretical framework, the participant’s perceptions and opinions regarding their experiences could be collated and analysed for this study.

Theme one was executed to consider if the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes are sufficient for real-world applications. It was utilized to consider if the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes are sufficient for real-world applications. The data revealed that the ECCE practitioners have developed specific skills and knowledge through the ELP. The majority of the practitioners feel that the qualification equipped them with a variety of skills, which includes: working with children with different abilities, gaining confidence as an ECCE practitioner, classroom management skills and the theory in the modules prepared them to have background knowledge of how an ECD centre works. The participants feel that teaching experience has been very valuable in their training. The data also revealed the following as a constraint to the ELP: The theory covered in the modules should be introduced more practically, more hands-on activities should be linked to the theory in the modules and a mock-up classroom should be created for the practitioners to practice during the lectures. For quality provisioning to be offered more hands-on activities should be implemented in the qualification that aligns with the NCF as stated by (Visser, 2021).

Theme two focused on the ease or transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners in ECD centres. The data emphasized the difficulties that the ECCE practitioners have experienced through the transition; these include a lack of communication skills; classroom management skills; patience with the learners; lesson planning; time management skills and conflict management. The above-mentioned skills play a vital role in providing quality provisioning at an ECD centre as an ECCE practitioner to enable learners to reach their full potential. The data

revealed that teaching experience provided the practitioners with the platform to gain confidence and experience with the difficulties they have experienced. This links directly to Atmore (2013) that recommends ECCE practitioners need to have the correct training for them to possess knowledge about ECD and the curriculum, resources, capacity and quality programmes. Harrison (2020) states that ECCE practitioners should receive ongoing support, sufficient instruction during training and equipped with the essential knowledge and skills during training.

Theme three accomplished to consider the skills obtained through the Health, safety and Nutrition training. The data for this theme revealed that the participants gained the following skills through the HSNU training: health and safety of learners, knowledge about nutrition, insight about learner's different abilities, creating a safe environment for learners, allergies of learners, evacuation methods, awareness of children's illnesses and being able to assist with injuries. These skills align with the content of the HSNU training as mentioned by Marotz (2013). The data also revealed that the participants felt there is a need to include first aid training in the module and that more hands-on activities should be integrated with the module to explain the theory. The participants did feel that the Health Safety and Nutrition training in the ELP is sufficient for real-world applications.

Theme four was used to establish the physical skills training competencies in early learning before entering an ECD centre as a practitioner. The participants agreed that the HC qualification together with teaching experience have introduced them to the following skills: classroom management skills, patience with the learners, developing children with different abilities, planning a daily programme, communication skills and lesson planning. However, the participants do feel that more practical training would be beneficial for them to master these skills effectively. This aligns with the National Integrated ECD Policy in SA (Desmond et al., 2019) which shared that practical skills like core knowledge and competencies are needed by practitioners who work with children between the ages of 0 – 4 years old at an ECD centre. These specialised competencies also include excellent leadership and communication skills; the ability to relate well with children to foster their development educationally and socially; organisational and planning skills; experience in the delivery of suitable curriculum in early education settings; ability to assess children's progress and keep records as appropriate; capable of working under pressure and managing time well to ensure the needs of the children are met; adaptive in making the classroom suitable for each child's needs; innovative in using different methods of working with the children to give them a holistic education; practical skills to deliver child health, exercise and nutrition and excellent at looking after the physical care of the children. As mentioned by Mampane (2021) these specialised competencies also include excellent leadership and communication skills the ability to relate well with children to foster their development educationally and socially, organisational and planning skills that aligns with the skills obtained through the HSNU training.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

The purpose of the study was to identify the training competencies affecting the provision of quality programmes for ECCE practitioners and to contribute to South Africa's knowledge of quality provisioning in early learning programmes. These programmes are intended to provide in-service practitioners with the beginning knowledge, skills, and applied competencies identified to be critical for facilitation at the early childhood level. The following recommendations are made to inform policy and developers at PHEI of crucial themes that were omitted during the ECCE training. The recommendations are based on the findings embedded in the following themes: 1. hands-on analysis, and 2. transition difficulty. 3 skills

obtained and 4. physical skills competencies. Firstly, emphasis on hands-on activities should be more explicit during in-service training in the form of mock-up classrooms. The data revealed that the participants need a clear picture or snapshot of the real ECD experience to ensure that training is actively aligned to the NCF as stated by Visser, et al., (2021) to ensure that practitioners provide quality teaching and care.

Secondly, the data revealed the awareness of newly trained practitioners that do not always provide quality education to children attending an ECD centre due to a lack of proficient instruction during training. This is due to a lack of follow-up support to help assist the students with work; a lack of knowledge; and a lack of follow-up support after the training is complete to ensure constant implementation (Harrison, 2020). A suggestion for ongoing support during the transition into the workplace. This is to ensure that an ECCE qualification does guarantee quality teaching and learning and addresses this challenge raised by Atmore, et al (2012). Thirdly, Health, Safety, and Nutrition training plays a core role in teaching and learning at an ECD centre. However, to provide the correct nutrition to children the data revealed uncertainty in this regard. Suggestions to mitigate this would be to strongly consider what Mathwasa and Shumba (2020) advocate for and that is to ensure that ECCE practitioners are trained with the practical skills necessary to fully understand and articulate the importance of a Health Safety and Nutrition impact.

Finally, a cognisance for physical skill competencies as the data revealed that the in-service practitioner required more training as emphasised by Garifullina and Garifullina (2019) the need for specialised competencies such as excellent leadership and communication, the ability to relate well with children to foster their development educationally and socially. The recommendation here aligns with Desmond, et al., (2019) and calls for an awareness of holistic education where practical skills should be implemented intentionally to support child health, encourage exercise, nutrition and physical care of the children. In conclusion, the limitations of the study revealed that the small sample size, time constraints, access to participants who completed an ECCE qualification in 2021 or 2022, and the data collection methods were time-consuming. The study was executed to consider if the hands-on activities integrated into early learning programmes are sufficient for real-world applications. Furthermore, to ascertain the transition difficulty of newly graduated practitioners into ECD centres and to establish if the insights and skills training have equipped these practitioners for an ECD centre. The hands-on practical skills training competencies in early learning before entering an ECD centre as a practitioner will inform the development of future programmes as well as policy.

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