



Systemic inarticulation as an obstacle to the education aspirations of mature women ECD practitioners

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Abstract

Recent research in South Africa indicates that notwithstanding official policies on articulation, Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners who obtain a qualification in their field at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college face significant hurdles in trying to access a university degree. In this article, we report on research conducted among a group of mature women who completed ECD programmes at TVET colleges, and their learning pathways toward the university Bachelor of Education qualification. Applying a narrative methodology, we conducted in-depth life history interviews to map the learning pathways of mature women ECD practitioners and to understand their education and training endeavours. Their stories revealed a number of barriers they encountered as mature women students, but in this article we highlight in particular the blockage they faced in seeking vertical progression through articulation of the ECD Level 5 and Level 6 Certificates with the Bachelor of Education degree, which led to a curriculum mapping exercise that attempted to shed light on this aspect. A key finding was that of programme and institutional inarticulation, resulting in stymied higher education aspirations for the majority of women in this study.

Keywords: learning pathways, articulation, access, Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners

Introduction

In this article, we focus on a study that was conducted among mature women students who had completed exit level certificates in Early Childhood Development (ECD) at public technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, and their learning pathways towards acquiring a university degree in their field. While the larger study dealt expansively with the women's life experiences with respect to their goals, in this article of more limited scope, we focus particularly on their attempts to gain entry to university on the basis of their prior vocational college qualifications and we interrogate the nature of the blockage encountered in this regard.

In education and training systems described as *joined up* or *coherent* in the literature, the question of how students progress vertically in their education or move seamlessly from one institution to another as they do so, might never arise. In other systems often described as *incoherent*, such mobility and portability of qualifications are fraught with difficulties and result in significant frustration (Aploon-Zokufa & Needham, 2023; Hoelscher et al., 2008; Papier et al., 2016). Defined as “mechanisms that enable student mobility within and among the institutions that comprise the tertiary system” (Ngethe, et al., 2008, cited in Papier et al., 2016, p. 44), the implication is that a well-articulated system consists of linkages enabling students to carry their learning credits from one institution to the next. Such a system has “no dead ends” according to a government education official (Minister of Education cited in Papier et al., 2016, p. 44), and knowledge acquired at one institution is recognised at another, especially if the knowledge gained allows for epistemological access into programmes that students wish to access. Systemic articulation thus refers to the joining up of qualifications and other aligned elements in support of efficient learning pathways across institutions, while specific articulation refers to formal and informal agreements between and among different institutions that may apply to particular programmes in the education system (South African Qualifications Authority, 2017). The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) averred that articulation is made possible through boundary crossing of the 'boundary zones' that students encounter between different elements of their learning pathways (South African Qualifications Authority, 2017, p. 15).

Currently, however, colleges and universities do not provide students with the mechanisms for access and mobility that they need to progress academically, and students encounter numerous barriers in trying to move vertically and horizontally (Papier et al., 2016). The lack of articulation in the South African education system (termed inarticulation in this paper) proved to be a fundamental hurdle to the mature women students in our study in preventing them from realising their academic and career aspirations. Despite policy objectives, the South African post-school education and training system has been shown to be poorly articulated, especially between vocational college programmes and university education, so TVET graduates struggle to access university for higher qualifications in their field (Papier et al., 2016).

Post-school education and training in South Africa

In South Africa, the post-school education and training system is comprised of private and public universities (higher education institutions), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, Community Education and Training (CET) colleges as well as private occupational training providers under the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs). While higher education institutions offer academic and professional education in a wide range of fields including the humanities, social sciences, education, engineering, business, and law inter alia, TVET colleges offer foundational knowledge and skills training applicable to particular occupations, for instance hospitality, healthcare, engineering trades, and so on (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). CET colleges offer training programmes for young people and adults who have not yet completed schooling thus affording learners a chance to obtain a school-leaving qualification through the National Senior Certificate (NSC) Examination or the National Senior Certificate for Adults (NASCA) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). A policy intention of the PSET system is that education and training offerings are coherently aligned to ensure that students have many opportunities for access, participation, and success, but vertical and horizontal articulation in the system is limited (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). The table below shows the various qualifications in the field of Early Childhood Development (ECD) that can be acquired at either a TVET college or a university.

Table 1

Types of ECD qualifications offered at TVET college and university – Access Requirements and Occupational Roles

ECD qualifications and institutions	Requirement for access	Roles that can be taken up with this qualification
ECD Level 1 Certificate (TVET college)	School leaving Grade 9 Certificate or access via RPL	ECD Practitioner in ECD Centre
ECD Level 4 Certificate (TVET college)	Grade 11 or Grade 12 (National Senior Certificate/NSC)	ECD Practitioner in ECD Centre
ECD Level 5 Certificate (TVET college)	Grade 12 (NSC) or ECD Level 4 Certificate	ECD Practitioner in ECD Centre Grade R (Reception Year or Grade 0) in ECD centres and Basic Education schools
ECD Level 6 Diploma (TVET college)	ECD Level 5 Certificate	ECD Practitioner in ECD Centre Grade R (Reception Year or Grade 0) in ECD centres and Basic Education schools
Bachelor of Education Foundation Phase (Level 7) (University)	Grade 12 (NSC with Bachelor Pass, and 33+ points in terms of university entrance criteria)	Grade R (Reception Year or Grade 0) in ECD centres and Basic Education schools Grade 1, Grade 2, Grade 3

Source: Authors' summary of SAQA Qualification ID numbers: 23114; 64649; 64650; and a public university B.Ed Degree programme requirements document.

The national qualifications framework as an enabler of articulation

National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) have been, and still are, a global phenomenon intended to harmonise education and training systems as well as to compare qualifications (Keevy, 2006). The South African NQF in its earliest policy formulation in 1995 sought to create a single, integrated framework for learning achievements, facilitate access to education, training and career pathways, as well as enable mobility and progression in these pathways (Allais, 2012; Wedekind, 2018). This eight-level framework attempted to incorporate all education and training qualifications across all institutional types delivering them, namely, schools, vocational colleges, universities, and private occupational training providers. About the South African NQF, Ensor (2003) noted that

it was implemented with the intention of integrating education and training in order to boost skill and productivity levels, promote stronger economic growth, as well as addressing issues of equity and social justice...the aims of the NQF are broadly consistent with similar initiatives in many other parts of the world designed to achieve standardisation, equivalence and portability of qualifications, especially through credit accumulation and transfer. . . (pp. 325–326).

At the heart of the NQF in post-apartheid South Africa was the goal of social justice in ensuring access to education and training opportunities for all, especially those disadvantaged by the previous discriminatory regime, and providing opportunities for the accumulation and transfer of learning credits. Thus, articulation was, and still is, an underpinning principle of the NQF within which all qualifications and institutions were located in processes driven by SAQA after 1996, to establish qualifications with a common format and based on common design principles. But NQFs also garnered significant critique about their ability to achieve policy intentions, in that, it is argued *inter alia*, learning comprises different kinds of knowledge/s and skills that cannot be equated in a single framework (Allais, 2011).

As a result of wide-ranging implementation difficulties among institutions seeking to achieve the prescripts of the original NQF, particularly different quality assurance bodies, a second iteration of the NQF in South Africa was promulgated through an amendment act that established three sub-frameworks within the overarching NQF (South African Qualifications Authority, 2008) namely, a General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework to deal with general schooling and vocational education and training qualifications at Level 1 to Level 4; a Higher Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) for university qualifications from Level 5 to Level 10; and an Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) for vocational and work-oriented qualifications from Level 1 to Level 8. The new 10-level NQF acknowledged that there could be at least three qualification pathways, each with its own quality assurance authority and mechanisms and with its own accredited qualifications and providers. What creates the potential for confusion is the fact that there are overlapping levels within different pathways, but the qualifications at overlapping levels might not have the same specifications and are

specific to the sub-framework, its quality assurance body, and providers within that sub-system. As Figure 1 below shows, overlapping levels occur more specifically at NQF Levels 5 and 6, in that TVET colleges, universities, and private occupational training providers offer qualifications at these same levels, but the qualifications have different structures, different rules, and are subject to different quality assurance processes. It was evident from our study that this apparent system incoherence caused confusion among our research participants and was a reason for their misperceptions and unmet expectations.

Figure 1
South African National Qualifications Framework

National Qualifications Framework				
Level	Sub-framework and qualification types			
10	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework	Doctoral Degree	*	Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework
		Doctoral Degree (Professional)		
9		Master's Degree	*	
		Master's Degree (Professional)		
8		Bachelor Honours Degree	Occupational Certificate (Level 8)	
		Postgraduate Diploma		
		Bachelor's Degree		
7		Bachelor's Degree	Occupational Certificate (Level 7)	
	Advanced Diploma			
6		Diploma	Occupational Certificate (Level 6)	
		Advanced Certificate		
5		Higher Certificate	Occupational Certificate (Level 5)	
4	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework	National Certificate	Occupational Certificate (Level 4)	
3		Intermediate Certificate	Occupational Certificate (Level 3)	
2		Elementary Certificate	Occupational Certificate (Level 2)	
1		General Certificate	Occupational Certificate (Level 1)	

*Qualification types beyond level 8 on the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) have not been determined.

Source: NQF Fact Sheet Available Online at <https://www.saqi.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Fact-Sheet-SAQI-FPI.pdf>

In addition to the principle of articulation within the NQF, another important concept instrumental to the NQF goal of widening participation and ensuring access of marginalised groups, is that of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). But the practice of RPL has had limited purchase in universities, as illustrated by Cooper and Harris (2013). In their study of why there had been so little take-up into university through RPL, these authors determined that differing perspectives of the nature of knowledge existed among institutions and were impacting on the possibility of RPL, and furthermore, that those who opposed RPL on epistemological grounds were powerful gatekeepers. In this regard Cooper and Harris (p. 462) argued that

knowledge is as much about cultural and institutional practices as it is about conceptual hierarchies. . . cultural practices translate into distinct organisational environments within which RPL has to take place and which play a significant role in offering affordances or barriers to pedagogic agency and the implementation of RPL.

Bridging the gap in understanding of knowledge forms among providers of training and education remains a critical issue for mature adult learners since the issue of knowledge and how it is acquired was found to be a significant impediment to progress for the so-called non-traditional students in our study.

Knowledge types as a barrier to articulation

The poor articulation of qualifications in South Africa has been attributed, *inter alia*, to differing conceptions of knowledge held by key systems role-players, and this resonates internationally with debates in the relevant scholarly literature. Epistemological standpoints have tended to create hard boundaries between vocational knowledge characterised as mainly practical, procedural knowledge (Young & Muller, 2016); and disciplinary knowledge that is declarative and cognate. The latter knowledge type, associated predominantly with formal general schooling and higher education, has also been termed “powerful knowledge” (Wheelahan, 2007, p. 639; see, also, Young & Muller, 2016), as expanded on below. This distinction within a hierarchy of knowledge types has over time contributed to vocational education being viewed as a barrier to higher education for students in vocational and other adult learning pathways (Murphy and Fleming, 2000).

In terms of classification of knowledge types (see Bernstein, 2000), context-dependent knowledge is associated with being practical and procedural, whereas context-independent knowledge “provide(s) generalizations and makes claims to universality; (and is) a basis for making judgements. . .”(Young & Muller, 2016, p. 111). Wheelahan (2007, p. 639) explained that context-dependent or mundane knowledge “is tied to specific contexts and events, so that the meaning is only understandable within that specific context and the material base it rests upon.” In contrast, context-independent or esoteric knowledge “has the potential to challenge the social distribution of power because of its. . . capacity to transform knowledge and how that knowledge is used.” Wheelahan argued that in Australia, vocational education and training through its emphasis on skills rather than disciplinary knowledge “excludes the working class and other disadvantaged social groups from access to powerful knowledge” (p.

637). While debate about the breadth and depth of knowledge applicable to vocational vis a vis university programmes constitutes only one of a range of blockages to progression encountered by students seeking articulation, we expanded on this issue given its emergence in the evidence as a key reason for systemic inarticulation that manifested itself as curriculum incoherence in the field of ECD.

Methodology

As stated earlier, this article is based on a larger research project that focused on the learning journeys of mature women aspiring to become qualified school educators. Using life history interview data obtained from targeted participants, we constructed detailed narratives of the women's learning pathways from TVET colleges towards higher education.

A research survey seeking to identify applicants to the Bachelor of Education Foundation Phase degree who had previously worked or who were working as ECD practitioners, and who had completed ECD qualifications at TVET colleges was distributed across two universities in the Western Cape. More than one hundred responses to the survey were received, and from these, twenty mature adult women were selected for in-depth life history interviews. The criteria for selection were those mature adult ECD practitioners who held TVET ECD qualifications and aspired to continue their education by obtaining a university degree and who had applied for access into the Bachelor of Education degree programme at universities between 2014 and 2018. Given logistical constraints, the women selected for life history interviews had to be residents in the Western Cape. Thus, eleven mature women ECD practitioners were asked to participate in the in-depth interviews that focused on their educational histories, post-school activities, and home and work lives. To protect anonymity and enable the women to speak freely they were asked to choose pseudonyms for their stories and the institutions involved were not named.

Subsequent to the in-depth interviews and what emerged from the qualitative data we undertook a curriculum mapping exercise (Greatorex et al., 2019) through which curriculum documents of the TVET college ECD certificates and that of the university B.Ed degree programme were compared in an effort to probe further into what appeared to be indicative of systemic inarticulation. For this exercise, we compared the ECD Level 5 (TVET college), ECD Level 6 (TVET college), and B.Ed Foundation Phase Level 7 (university) qualifications. Key elements of the comparison were the purpose statements of the different qualifications, and their emphases, as far as could be ascertained from this high-level exercise, on either disciplinary (cognate, context-independent) knowledge or on practical (contextualised, context-dependent, vocational) knowledge, by the two institutions offering the qualification/s.

Findings and discussion

What the women's narratives revealed about their pathways to higher education

All the women in the sample of participants taken from the broader survey had applied numerous times for access to university qualifications, with limited or no feedback regarding their application status. Their education pathways and experiences of higher education applications were strewn with setbacks. Universities, where access through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was possible, were able to enrol four of the participants, but it had taken these participants between four and seven years to gain entry to the B.Ed (Foundation Phase) degree. In other cases where participants had not heard of RPL, or in universities where access through RPL was not possible, participants gained access to a higher certificate and a diploma course without obtaining credits for learning completed at the same NQF levels in their previous TVET college programmes. Thus, RPL provided a possible gateway to higher education for the women who were able to obtain this access. The seven women who had not yet gained access to university at the time of the interviews were still in pursuit of this quest, having been on this pathway for between four and six years at the time. The following extracts¹ from a selection of the women's narratives illustrate the blockages they encountered, particularly their experiences of rejection in their attempts to access higher education.

Babalwa (33 years)

At the time of the interview, Babalwa was married with three children. She was enrolled in the Grade R Diploma (ECD level 6), having completed both ECD Level 4 and Level 5 at a TVET college. Babalwa applied for the B.Ed degree, but the institution where she applied did not offer RPL as a pathway into the Faculty of Education and therefore she was enrolled for a three-year diploma in Grade R teaching. Her ECD qualifications were not viewed as sufficient for entry into the degree programme. She said,

. . . after I got my ECD certificate I wanted to go further with my studies, I wanted to go to the University. . . I got more interested into doing ECD because I can see now it is going to take me from point A to point B – I can see it's going somewhere. I went and looked for a school there in University A, I applied there, I think I applied twice but, unfortunately, I was rejected. I think it's because of the, because they said they wanted code 4 (50 %), (for my NSC results) and I got code 3, and the 4th one was 49% and they said I must go to RPL. I don't know what is RPL or, if I still remember. I think they said it's RPL where there is education for old women.

Kwakhanya (35 years)

Kwakhanya, a single mother with one child, had completed ECD Level 4 and Level 5 while working as a Grade R practitioner at a primary school. At the time of the interview, she was completing a higher diploma in adult education, hoping to use this diploma as a pathway into

¹ These transcripts have not been edited because we want to present the actual responses of our participants.

the B.Ed. Prior to entering the higher diploma, she had successfully completed a higher certificate in adult education. In the interview, Kwakhanya explained,

. . . after level 5, I was trying all the Universities, but I was not accepted, I tried another, the fees there they are very expensive and they need, they want upfront payment, you must pay their fees in full, so I couldn't afford that. I tried, I applied at (University A), that's when I was told that I don't qualify for a B-Ed, but I qualify for Adult Education. Then let me take it because I don't just want to sit with Level 5 because there were these threats that a practitioner with level 5 teaching Grade R will be kicked out by 2021, so I took the offer from (University A) . . . I also went back to University B and I applied again, then they rejected my application. I think last year in the beginning of the year [last year], so I thought I should go in person so that they. . . I needed them to explain to me why they rejected my application, then the lady that assisted me there, she told me that with the Matric results that I have, I need to do a course that will uplift or get me a higher score, so I told her that I'm actually studying Adult Education at University A then she said no, bring those results with your Matric certificate then we'll see if you meet the requirements. . .

Elethu (37 years)

Elethu was a single mother with two children and had successfully completed ECD Level 4, Level 5, and the Higher Diploma, before completing the RPL programme at university in order to be accepted into the B.Ed degree. Elethu said,

The level five will only give you a Grade R entry. And then when you are in Grade R you are not . . . you are not going to be able to . . . to be able to teach Grade 1, Grade 2 or Grade 3 learners because . . . you are not in that level. That means you have to go to a University, right, and then when you're entering the University they're not even looking at your certificate that you're just bringing. They only want your Grade 12 certificate because this is the only thing that will help you to get the entry and then that means for all these years that you have been struggling, [it's] all in vain. So, I think government will do much . . . will do so much better if they can give the recognition to the ECD. . .

Kungawo (38 years)

As a single mother with one child, Kungawo was enrolled in a RPL programme at the time of the interview, having successfully completed Educare certificates at a TVET college. Like the other women in our study, she applied for entry into the B.Ed degree at various universities and received acceptance into the RPL programme at only one institution. Kungawo reiterated simply that,

. . . they couldn't accept me for the degree in education, I've been trying at university B, I wanted to study while I'm working, I think I applied three times . . .

Nomha (43 years)

Nomha, a single mother with one child had completed ECD Level 5 and Educare N4-N6 in the hope of accessing the B.Ed degree. At the time of the interview, she was not aware of the existence of an RPL route into university. Nomha explained,

... Before I got my diploma in ECD, I completed the N4 Certificate, N5 Certificate and then N6 certificate. I was told that for me to go to get into B.Ed. I must first wait for my diploma and then I can be able to apply with that. So, I've waited until I received my diploma, then I applied again with my diploma but they still rejected me, which I fail to understand. Firstly, they said I'm on a waiting list and I applied for 3 years, that was from 2016, 2017 and 2018 I was applying at university B. Till then I told myself let me just give up at university B. That is why I told myself maybe let me try university A. I was also rejected.

Comparing curricula: The TVET college ECD certificates and the university B.Ed degree

Since the women in the study had no idea why their TVET college ECD certificates were not being accepted for entry (or credit) in the B.Ed Foundation Phase degree, we undertook an explorative curriculum mapping exercise to enable a comparison of the exit level outcomes of the TVET ECD Level 5 and Level 6 certificates, and the exit level outcomes of the university B.Ed degree at NQF Level 7. The B.Ed degree is comprised of credits at NQF Levels 5, 6, and 7 that are spread across a four-year programme, but this national qualification specifies outcomes only at the exit level, Level 7, therefore universities design down from the exit level outcomes to determine the outcomes for preceding Levels 5 and 6. Our intention with the curriculum mapping was to discern whether, on the face of it, there were significant incongruencies between the college and university qualifications that prevented the Level 5/6 college ECD certificate from being recognised as sufficient for entry into (at least) or credited towards the second year of the B.Ed degree, the university first-year being at NQF Level 5. The exit outcomes for each of these ECD qualification levels offered insight into the differences and commonalities of the two qualification types that were signified somewhat in their purpose and rationale statements. What became clear from our explorative curriculum exercise was that the TVET college ECD qualifications at certificate level 5 and diploma level 6 (a qualification for teaching schooling level Grade R or Grade 0), despite the congruency of their purpose and rationale statements, had not been curriculated or aligned with a pathway to the university B.ED Foundation Phase (for teaching schooling Grades R/0–Grade 3) in mind, setting up the possibility for future inarticulation in this field. The table below sets out the purposes and rationale for each accredited qualification, as extracted from the qualifications listed on the national SAQA qualifications database and a public university programme found online.

Table 2

Purpose and Rationale statements of the ECD Level 5 Certificate; ECD Level 6 Diploma and B. Ed (Foundation Phase) Level 7 degree

TVET ECD Certificate Level 5	TVET ECD Diploma Level 6	University B.Ed Degree Level 7
<p>The purpose of this qualification is to qualify students for a career in teaching and facilitation in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) band. Students will develop the knowledge, skills and applied basic competencies crucial for ECD practitioners in both private and public pre-schools, creches and educare facilities.</p> <p>This qualification is designed to deliver students who demonstrate a strong focus on critical, adaptive and reflective thinking, and who are able to act both professionally and ethically so that they can contribute meaningfully to ECD-level education. The programme design thus facilitates the development of a well-rounded beginner ECD practitioner, and graduates will be required to demonstrate both theoretical depth and the applied skills and competencies relevant to ECD practitioner practice.</p>	<p>The Diploma in Grade R Teaching has the potential to improve the quality of Grade R programmes since it provides practitioners with opportunities to master the knowledge and skills required to improve their classroom practice. This qualification aims to prepare for providing learning and formal schooling, through a flexible, informal, child-centred and play-based approach.</p> <p>This qualification will provide diverse opportunities, such as bridging a divide in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) continuum, influencing teaching practice in Foundation Phase and encouraging and facilitating collaboration. It will provide Grade R teachers with access to an accredited, nationally recognised specialist qualification.</p>	<p>The Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase Teaching is intended as an initial professional qualification with specialisation linked to the Foundation Phase of teaching (Grades R to 3).</p> <p>This qualification will provide learners with a thorough grounding in the key disciplines related to Foundation Phase teaching. This qualification is thus structured in such a way so as to ensure knowledge specialisation is linked with the Foundation Phase of teaching, while simultaneously developing practical skills and work integrated learning experiences in order to prepare beginner teachers for teaching in diverse contexts.</p>

Source: Purpose statements extracted from ECD certificates SAQA ID: 64649; SAQA ID: 64650 and a University Bachelor of Education (Foundation Phase) Programme

While the TVET ECD qualifications are described in national policies as being within the ECD so-called band of education and training and the B.Ed degree resides within higher education qualifications for teaching, the TVET ECD Level 6 diploma descriptor acknowledges the continuum between the college ECD qualification and Grade R teaching in the B.Ed Foundation Phase. The purpose statements in the table above contain an explicitly stated pathway from the TVET ECD Level 5 certificate and Level 6 Diploma, into the university Level 7 school teaching Grade R/0 qualification, which is conceivably why TVET college graduates would have the expectation that such an articulation pathway exists for holders of the college qualifications.

Furthermore, the purpose statements of the ECD Level 5 and Level 6 certificates indicate that these qualifications provide opportunities for college graduates in the field of ECD and at Level 6 delivers knowledge and skills required for teaching Grade R/0 in schools. ECD Level 5 graduates are required to demonstrate both theoretical knowledge and practical skills that are relevant to ECD, along with skills such as professionalism and ethical consciousness, while ECD Level 6 graduates have to be able to bridge the divide between the fields of ECD and that of Basic Education/schooling, specifically Grade R/0. While the TVET certificates anticipate a pathway into a university teacher qualification, the B.Ed Foundation Phase degree offered at universities does not appear to cater for students who might have completed some levels or credits of the qualification through a vocational pathway at a TVET college. The Bachelor of Education is simply described as a professional qualification offering graduates specialist knowledge in the Foundation Phase of Basic Education, as well as providing students with theoretical disciplinary underpinnings and practical skills.

It was evident from the lived experiences of the women in our study that participants viewed their TVET ECD certificates as a bridge between college and the university Foundation Phase qualification, and that they aspired to a higher level schoolteacher qualification that they believed was provided by their college certificate/s. From the women's perspectives, it made sense for them to apply for the B.Ed degree after completing TVET ECD certificates, since the access requirement for college Level 5 and Level 6 was lower (a National Senior Certificate instead of the National Senior Certificate with Bachelors entry as prescribed by the university) and they also had access to funding for ECD training through the national Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA). The women were under the impression that the learning acquired at NQF Levels 5 and 6 through qualifications registered on the OQSF and delivered by TVET colleges that are accredited institutions, would be matched up with the learning requirements of the first and second years of the university qualification, also described as Levels 5 and 6 albeit within the HEQSF.

The next table is based on the curriculum mapping undertaken to identify the type/s of intended knowledge and skills at each of the certificate, diploma, and degree levels. At a high level, we wanted to establish a basis for a learning pathway (or not) from the TVET Level 5 certificate through the university Level 7 degree that could justify at least entry to the university degree and, at most, the awarding of meaningful credits towards the achievement of the degree.

Table 3
Comparing the Exit Level Outcomes of ECD Level 5; ECD Level 6; and B. ED Foundation Phase Level 7 qualifications

TVET ECD Level 5 Certificate	TVET ECD Level 6 Diploma	University B.ED Level 7 Degree
Mediate learning in integrated and holistic learning programme	Mediate learning through effective communication in order to mediate learning.	

TVET ECD Level 5 Certificate	TVET ECD Level 6 Diploma	University B.ED Level 7 Degree
	Competence in numeracy and elementary stats	Effective communication using various mediums with confidence and expressiveness in Xhosa, Zulu or Sotho.
Facilitate learning of those with barriers to learning and special needs, inclusive approach	Plan and design learning prog for Gr R and diverse needs	Understand theories, principles of child development, learning and motivation through stages of childhood and adolescence
Work with family and communities to develop child's potential Work with colleagues, families and community systems to develop each child's potential as fully as possible.	Demonstrate dealing with diversity; identify learning and social problems Operate within the education system and community systems	Understand inclusive education, national and international policies, historical development
Manage and organise learning programme within school curriculum framework (as appropriate) Plan and implement appropriate learning activities, materials, practices based on knowledge of principles and practices of the specific content	Interpret Grade R school curricula and use available resources Plan, design, and reflect on learning programmes appropriate for Grade R learners and diverse learning needs.	Understand aims of ECD education; the informal teaching approach, the daily programme, play opportunities and evaluation in early childhood education.
Promote high quality ECD programmes	Positive work ethic and values, conduct that enhances and develops teaching profession	Use leadership and management skills to motivate learners and other educators in school systems, management of information, current theories and practices
Select and use appropriate methods and procedures for assessment and reporting progress	Monitor and assess learner progress to improve teaching and learning	Understand key assessment concepts in range of contexts

Source: Authors' summary of exit outcomes of the SAQA registered qualifications ID 64649; ID 64650; and a University B.Ed Foundation Phase degree programme

As can be seen from this table, the TVET ECD Level 5 and Level 6 exit outcomes specify the demonstration of skills such as mediating active learning, facilitating learning for children with learning barriers, promoting of safety and security, planning, managing, and organising a daily programme, as well as selecting and using appropriate methods for teaching and assessment in the classroom. Largely, the TVET qualifications do not specify in the outcome statements the underpinning knowledge or theory that has to be acquired in order to enable these outcomes to be demonstrated, creating the impression that these outcomes are based on practical knowledge and are context-dependent. At ECD Level 6 the activities of planning, designing, interpreting, monitoring, and assessing in ECD classrooms similarly presupposes

theoretical knowledge that underpins these competencies, but no breadth or depth of such knowledge is indicated.

The exit level outcomes of the B.Ed degree specifically states the disciplinary, context-independent knowledge that students ought to acquire, in terms of concepts, theories, aims, principles, policies and so on. By backward mapping from these exit-level outcomes, university curriculum planners ensure that curriculum scaffolding of theoretical and practical content can occur from the first to the fourth year of the qualification.

What was noteworthy from this somewhat rudimentary comparison of the TVET level 5 and level 6 ECD qualifications with the level 7 B.Ed Foundation Phase degree outcomes, were the similarities in the curriculum content being delivered, and our observation that a curriculum matching exercise by both the TVET college and the university might easily synergise necessary knowledge and skills focus areas across ECD programme levels. Our curriculum mapping was limited, however, in that it had not been the major thrust of the research at the outset and was undertaken as the result of a curiosity that arose from the women's narratives. Furthermore, we did not have access to the university degree's Level 5 and 6 outcomes that would have been designed down from the Level 7 exit outcomes, and which could differ across universities because of university curriculum autonomy (to some extent) at the lower levels. This meant that we could not compare TVET college and university outcomes at each level across the qualifications delivered.

Conclusions from the data

Stymied aspirations as a consequence of vertical inarticulation

Our initial survey data showed that large numbers of ECD practitioners complete ECD certificates successfully at TVET colleges annually, spending years obtaining qualifications that subsequently afford them limited access or progression in the university teacher education pathway. Data from TVET colleges revealed that hundreds of black women ECD practitioners participate annually in ECD Level 1, 4, and 5 certificate programmes in the Western Cape. A possible reason for this is that TVET ECD qualifications at the time of the research offered the prospect of national student funding through the ETDP SETA and were therefore provided free of charge, together with a stipend that enabled the mature women students to support their roles as home carers as well. Despite the frustrations that lack of articulation occasioned down the line, these college qualifications fulfilled an essential need for access to learning for these mature women.

It was evident from the women's stories that the college ECD qualifications they had used to create an education career foundation in their ECD pathways, were not the stepping stones to further studies that they had expected, and they felt strongly that their aspirations had been stymied by the education system. During their college studies all the participants had volunteered at ECD centres with the aim of gaining permanent employment after completing their TVET college qualifications, thus the part-time college programmes had allowed them to continue working while studying. They did voluntary work at the ECD centres four days a

week and attended classes on one day a week. However, these participants expressed the view that college certificates held poorer employment prospects and garnered lower salaries in the ECD field compared with a university qualification, hence their desire to undertake the B.Ed Foundation Phase degree in the hope of greater financial rewards and better career options.

Inarticulation as a result of epistemological and curriculum differences

Our study emphasised the relevance of epistemological debates with regard to the valuing of knowledge depending on where and how such knowledge had been acquired. This was particularly experienced by the non-traditional students who moved from one institution to another and who sought to acquire both accredited occupational skills certificates and university qualifications, as also found in other studies (Ensor, 2003; Gamble, 2006). While the South African NQF distinguishes between a vocational pathway via TVET colleges and occupational training and an academic pathway via schooling and universities, the participants in our study viewed qualifications achieved simply as stepping stones to further studies and employability, and expected that their achievements located on the NQF would have both currency and portability.

From our initial exploration of the curriculum outcomes of TVET certificates and the university degree, the exit outcomes of TVET ECD qualifications required demonstrations of practical knowledge similar to those indicated in the B.Ed Foundation Phase degree, but theoretical foundations were implied rather than specified. Therefore, the skills expressed in the TVET outcomes appeared to be context-dependent knowledge rather than the disciplinary, context-independent knowledge specifically stated in the B.Ed degree, that results, potentially, in “powerful knowledge” as described by Wheelahan (2007, p. 639) and others. Our cursory curriculum comparison, conducted at an overview level, showed that the different institutional types (college and university) were not engaging with mutually exclusive knowledge structures, i.e. with only practical knowledge, or only disciplinary knowledge (see Gamble, 2006). The exit outcomes of the college ECD certificates and the university degree suggest that intentional curriculum mapping could enable the appropriate scaffolding of knowledge across the different qualifications, resulting in more inter-dependent and integrated programmes that create meaningful learning pathways for students. It would appear from the available literature on articulation in South Africa that assumptions are made (mostly by higher education role-players) about who accesses particular knowledge types, and where (and how) these knowledge types are acquired, without the detailed curriculum analysis to support such views, giving rise to significant articulation and progression blockages. Bridging the perceived knowledge gaps between vocational and academic qualifications through structured curriculum engagement and reform would appear to be crucial for purposes of widening access, participation, and success for students in post-school education and training (Gamble, 2006).

The limitations of RPL in enabling access in the absence of systemic articulation

What emerged from our study was the critical role played by university RPL mechanisms for acknowledging prior qualifications attained, and enabling entry into university on the basis of these post-school learning achievements for so-called non-traditional mature students who had not been able to enter university directly from school for one reason or another (Osman & Castle, 2001). However, RPL afforded the successful applicants access only into the first-year level (Level 5) of the B.Ed degree, rather than recognising any of the disciplinary learning credits that they had obtained in two of the TVET college ECD certificates in the occupational pathway levels 5 and 6. Thus, RPL was in fact not an enabler of articulation per se, but an enabler of access to university (Osman & Castle, 2001). The fact that college ECD certificate graduates might have to repeat learning and acquire skills already gained in their prior qualification meant that they had wasted time, finances, and effort in arriving only at the B.Ed entry level at university.

Furthermore, the data showed that the learning pathways of mature black women ECD practitioners were long, with many hurdles to be overcome. While gaining access to training at TVET colleges was relatively easy in terms of the entry requirements being lower than those required by a university, transitioning thereafter to university participation was a definite barrier to progression. The RPL university mechanism was the only difference between mature women who gained access to the degree programme and those who did not, thus their progression was decided by the RPL programme. But information about the RPL route had proved difficult to find; those who gained access to university through RPL explained how they had come upon this information incidentally. Adult learners need accessible information and guidance on RPL routes into university, rather than being left to stumble upon the information coincidentally, which in the case of the women in this study added substantially to the time it took for them to finally enrol for the B.Ed degree on their long and arduous journeys to achieve their education aspirations and more sustainable futures.

Significance and implications of this research

This research contributes to existing knowledge and understanding of how mature adult learners, specifically black women, navigate convoluted learning and articulation pathways across a complex education and training landscape in South Africa. It was evident from our consideration of the reasons for qualification and programme inarticulation, that epistemologies and curricula in the field of ECD and Foundation Phase teaching require interrogation and review in order to enhance coherence and progression possibilities.

Furthermore, our exploration of mature women's learning pathways in ECD revealed that while South African government policy imperatives are to increase access for adult learners, widen participation, and increase opportunities for further and higher learning, there have been limited initiatives and interventions towards the attainment of such policy goals. An implication of our research is to suggest that a detailed curriculum mapping exercise be undertaken by curriculum experts to construct a suite of ECD qualifications that takes into

account programmes delivered across the education and training system. Such an endeavour would ultimately contribute to systems coherence in the field, and towards fulfilling articulation promises made in national education and training policies since 1994.

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