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English as an additional language: Professional development needs of early childhood practitioners in historically disadvantaged contexts

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Background: Early childhood development (ECD) practitioners face tremendous challenges in supporting learners' development in English as an additional language (EAL). The lack of a formal ECD curriculum in South Africa exacerbates this challenge for African learners from historically disadvantaged backgrounds as there is a lack of guidance on how to introduce EAL.

Aim: This study investigated factors impacting on ECD practitioners' ability to facilitate EAL, determine the professional development needs of ECD practitioners at historically disadvantaged ECD centres in facilitating the acquisition of EAL and used the results to make recommendations to be considered when developing support initiatives to ECD practitioners in this context.

Setting: Ga-Rankuwa, a township north of Pretoria.

Methods: A descriptive survey design was employed to collect mainly quantitative data and a limited amount of qualitative data. The data were descriptively analysed.

Results: Prevalent factors that could impact ECD practitioners' abilities to facilitate EAL included their English proficiency, qualifications and the language of learning and teaching used in the classroom. The participants communicated a need for assistance with (1) enhancing their knowledge on the acquisition of EAL, (2) materials to use in language lessons and (3) lesson planning.

Conclusion: There is an urgent need to develop support structures to assist historically disadvantaged ECD practitioners in facilitating the acquisition of EAL. The results of the study can serve as a starting point for planning workshops where ECD practitioners can be trained to develop suitable lesson plans and resources as well as appropriate techniques to enhance preschool learners' acquisition of EAL.

Keywords: English additional language; early childhood development practitioners; historically disadvantaged; early childhood development centres; professional development needs.

Introduction

Despite a growing awareness that education in the home language is more effective for learning (Heugh 2017), English remains the dominant language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in South African schools as well as in other high-status domains such as politics and the media (Chetty 2012). As home language education is not currently the reality in South Africa, learners need to be supported to reach the highest levels of English proficiency to aid their academic performance. Given that it can take 5 years or more for a learner to acquire academic competency in an additional language (Clifford, Rhodes & Paxton 2014), Du Plessis and Louw (2008) recommends that English needs to be introduced from as early as the preschool years, gradually increasing the learners' exposure to English as the LoLT as their understanding of English grows. This is supported by Hugo and Nieman (2010) who proposed that the informal educational methods applied during the preschool years, where learners learn through play, create the ideal setting in which to facilitate these communicative abilities.

Equipping early childhood development (ECD) practitioners with the skills to facilitate the acquisition of English as an additional language (EAL) is, however, a daunting task given the

facts that over 1600 ECD practitioners in Gauteng do not have any qualification (Ngobeni 2018) and general teacher-training programmes typically neglect to equip educators with the necessary skills to facilitate the acquisition of EAL. Although it is clear that drastic measures are needed to ensure that learners, especially those in historically disadvantaged ECD centres, are afforded the best foundation to prepare them for formal schooling, the lack of a standardised national curriculum for ECD, in conjunction with the general quality of ECD programmes in South Africa, proliferates this dilemma. In addition, the lack of any formal ECD English additional language guidelines leaves ECD practitioners, many of whom are inadequately qualified, to figure out how to introduce EAL by themselves.

Hugo and Lenyai (eds. 2013) stated that a basic knowledge of the theories underlying the acquisition of an additional language is crucial for educators, and it directly influences their ability to provide appropriate instruction to EAL learners (eds. Hugo & Lenyai 2013). This knowledge is especially important in schools or districts where limited resources result in little or no instructional support in the learners' home language. Moodley, Kritzinger and Vinck (2016) furthermore proposed certain educator and learner variables that could impact learners' competency in acquiring EAL. Key variables highlighted included educators' first language, age and experience, as well as learners' first language and gender.

It is thus evident that there is an urgent need for research in facilitating the EAL skills of, particularly, preschool learners and that ECD practitioners (especially those in historically disadvantaged areas) need support in this regard. Current policies and strategies are, however, not addressing educator professional development comprehensively or effectively as professional development endeavours are not informed by the training needs of the affected educators (SADTU 2015), in this case, ECD practitioners in historically disadvantaged areas.

The aim of this article is, therefore, to highlight the factors impacting on the ability of historically disadvantaged ECD practitioners to facilitate the EAL skills of preschool learners, to explore the preparedness as well as the professional development needs of the ECD practitioners in this regard and to use the results to highlight variables and make recommendations to be considered when developing support initiatives to ECD practitioners in this context.

Literature review

The use of English as the LoLT in education is a contentious one globally and even more so in South Africa where there are 11 official languages. According to the latest South African School Survey report released by the Department of Basic Education, over 60% of South African learners prefer English as their LoLT even though only 7% of pupils speak English as their home language. Many explanations for this have been proposed – some political, some personal and

some purely practical. Whatever the motives may be, large numbers of children for whom English is an additional language are placed in ECD centres where English is the LoLT, even though they have had very little exposure to English (Du Plessis & Louw 2008). Extensive research (Henning & Dampier 2012; Jordaan 2011; Van Kleeck 2014) on the acquisition of an additional language shows that an additional language needs 6–8 years of well-resourced teaching before it can be successfully used as a LoLT. Thus, young learners often do not have adequate time to develop the English language skills they need for learning before they have to make the transition to primary school.

Despite the fact that additional language learning in the South African educational context is of the utmost importance for learners' academic success, there is no guarantee that educators in the foundation phase, especially those in poorly resourced environments, have the skills to facilitate the acquisition of EAL (Lenyai 2011). Whilst investigating teaching EAL in the foundation phase of schools in disadvantaged areas, Lenyai (2011) discovered that the methods that educators implemented to teach English (teacher-dominated interactions focussing on drilling and repetition without comprehension) did not develop children's comprehension and communication skills. Lenyai (2011) argued that if educators do not use methods that encourage children to communicate in English, the learners might not acquire the competence needed to use English as the sole LoLT from Grade 4 onwards as is currently recommended by the South African government, where learners typically learn in their home language for the first 3 years (Grades 1–3) then switch to either English or Afrikaans from Grade 4 onwards. Similarly, Scarinci et al. (2015) reported that many ECD practitioners lack knowledge of child language development and received limited training in this area. A lack of knowledge in this regard could lead to educators selecting inappropriate content and unsuitable teaching approaches.

Challenges posed by the depth of educators' knowledge regarding the facilitation of an additional language are further exacerbated by inequality in South Africa's ECD sector. It is a well-known fact that the quality of education in rural and township ECD centres is adversely affected by several factors, including difficulty in accessing the centres, limited resources as well as the fact that learners receive less instructional time because of poor punctuality and absenteeism (Aubrey 2017). Zama (2014) furthermore reported a lack of support for educators who teach first additional language reading in the foundation phase, whilst investigating the experiences of educators in rural schools. Educators in that study indicated a lack of adequate support from parents as well as from the Department of Basic Education and requested more in-service training, workshops and monitoring of teaching practices. Adler (quoted by Wium 2010) also found that educators' competence and subject knowledge, particularly in the foundation phase, need to improve if learners are to understand and perform better in acquiring additional language skills.

Problem statement

There appears to be a paucity of research relating to the acquisition of EAL in the ECD sector in South Africa, despite the fact that many young learners in South Africa are placed in English ECD centres without any prior knowledge of English. Very few ECD practitioners have, furthermore, been trained on the theories of additional language acquisition or even first language acquisition (Du Plessis & Louw 2008; Scarinci et al. 2015). This often leads to educators feeling incompetent and unsure, rendering the educational process less effective. It is, therefore, crucial that the EAL teaching needs of ECD practitioners should be investigated and addressed. A needs analysis to determine the professional development needs of historically disadvantaged ECD practitioners in this regard was thus conducted. The aim of the needs analysis was to pinpoint factors impacting on the ability of historically disadvantaged ECD practitioners to facilitate the acquisition of EAL, to explore the preparedness as well as the professional development needs of the ECD practitioners in this regard and to use the results to highlight variables and make recommendations to be considered when developing support initiatives to ECD practitioners in this context.

Research methods and design

This research aimed to explore and determine the professional development needs of historically disadvantaged ECD practitioners to facilitate the acquisition of EAL. A needs analysis was undertaken to:

- provide insight into the professional profile of the ECD practitioners, as well as to identify prevalent factors that may impact on their ability to facilitate the EAL skills of their learners
- explore the ECD practitioners' perceptions of their preparedness to facilitate the EAL skills of their learners and
- determine the training and support needs of ECD practitioners in terms of facilitating the acquisition of EAL.

Research design

The study employed a descriptive survey design that collected mainly quantitative data and a limited amount of qualitative data through questionnaires. The data were descriptively analysed, and the qualitative data were listed and quantified.

The participants

The study focused on ECD practitioners employed at ECD centres in Ga-Rankuwa, a historically disadvantaged township located about 37 km north of Pretoria. A total of 20 ECD centres in the whole of Ga-Rankuwa were identified. Early childhood development practitioners responsible for learners between the ages of four and five from all the ECD centres were invited to participate in the study. All ECD practitioners (n = 28) agreed to participate in the study. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

TABLE 1: Professional profile and teaching context (n = 28).

Characteristic	Description	Number of participants	% of participants
Age	20–25	3	10.7
	25–30	8	28.6
	30–35	6	21.4
	35–40	9	32.1
	40–45	1	3.6
	45–50	1	3.6
Proficient in more than one language	Yes	27	96.4
	No	1	3.6
Language proficiency†	SePedi	7	25.0
	Tshivenda	1	3.6
	English	28	100.0
	Setswana	26	92.9
	IsiZulu	6	21.4
	XiTsonga	2	7.1
	SiSwati	0	0.0
	IsiXhosa	0	0.0
	Afrikaans	4	14.3
	SeSotho	5	17.9
	IsiNdebele	1	3.6
Highest qualification	Grade 9	1	3.6
	Grade 10	1	3.6
	Grade 11	1	3.6
	Grade 12	6	21.3
	Level 1 Certificate	3	10.7
	Level 4 Certificate	1	3.6
	NQF Level 4	5	17.9
	NQF Level 5	1	3.6
	ECD Certificate	6	21.3
	Teacher Certificate	1	3.6
	Grade R Certificate	1	3.6
	Child Care Certificate	1	3.6
Length of training	Not provided	11	39.3
	0–6 months	5	17.9
	6–12 months	8	28.5
	12–18 months	1	3.6
	18–24 months	3	10.7
Teaching experience in years	0–5	16	57.1
	5–10	8	28.6
	10–15	4	14.3
List of institutions where participants received training	FET/Technical Colleges	13	46.4
	NGO	8	28.6
	High School	4	14.3
	Other	3	10.7
Language of learning and teaching	SePedi	0	0.0
	Tshivenda	0	0.0
	English	18	64.3
	Setswana	19	67.9
	IsiZulu	0	0.0
	XiTsonga	1	3.6
	SiSwati	0	0.0
	IsiXhosa	0	0.0
	Afrikaans	0	0.0
	SeSotho	0	0.0
	IsiNdebele	0	0.0
Languages used in classroom	SePedi	0	0.0
	Tshivenda	0	0.0
	English	23	82.1
	Setswana	24	85.7
	IsiZulu	0	0.0
	XiTsonga	0	0.0
	SiSwati	0	0.0

TABLE 1 (Continous): Professional profile and teaching context (*n* = 28).

Characteristic	Description	Number of participants	% of participants
	IsiXhosa	0	0.0
	Afrikaans	0	0.0
	SeSotho	0	0.0
	IsiNdebele	1	3.6
Number of learners in classes	10–20	13	46.4
	20–30	11	39.3
	30–40	3	10.7
	40–50	1	3.6

FET, further education and training; NQF, National Qualifications Framework; ECD, early childhood development.

†, Participants could select more than one language. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) consist of 10 levels divided into three bands; Levels 1–4 equate to high school grades 9–12 or vocational training, 5–7 are college diplomas and technical qualifications, 7–10 are university degrees. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges, what were previously called FET colleges provide after-school education for those who choose not to attend a traditional university.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are corporations that are legally constituted by natural or legal 'people' (such as an incorporated company). An NGO runs independently from any form of government, even if funded by a government.

Data collection

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire using Likert-type items ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire were employed to obtain qualitative data. The questionnaires were constructed by adapting questions from existing questionnaires and surveys and by formulating new questions after an in-depth review of literature relating to the phenomena under investigation. The questionnaire was pre-tested to identify potential problems in the questionnaire prior to finalising the content, to determine the time for completion and to enhance the internal validity and reliability thereof.

Data analysis

Responses on the five-point Likert-type items were collapsed during the analysis with 'strongly agree' and 'agree' constituting 'agree'; 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' constituting 'disagree' and no responses and 'unsure' constituting 'unsure'. This was done to facilitate the presentation and interpretation of the results. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 23. The descriptive analysis of the results of the questionnaire was reported in frequencies and percentages and displayed in tables.

Inductive analysis was used for the qualitative data gathered. During the inductive analysis process, the researcher identified key themes within the researched area by reducing the material to a set of themes or categories (Creswell 2013). The Framework Method, as described by Gale et al. (2013), was used to further assist with analysing the data. This method allowed the researcher to identify commonalities and differences in the qualitative data by drawing descriptive and/or explanatory conclusions clustered around themes (Gale et al. 2013).

Ethical consideration

The research project was approved by the Sefako Makgatho University Research Ethics Committee (MREC/H/128/2014: PG). Ethical considerations of protection from harm, informed consent, right to privacy and honesty with professional colleagues were considered throughout the project.

Results

Professional profile of the early childhood development practitioners and prevalent factors that may impact on their ability to facilitate the English additional language skills of learners

Context-specific demographic information was gathered regarding the participants and the participating ECD centres. These data were used to identify and describe factors that might affect historically disadvantaged ECD practitioners' ability to facilitate the acquisition of EAL. Table 1 provides a summary of the professional profile of the ECD practitioners as well as their teaching context.

The participants represented a broad age spectrum. Most of the participants (53.5%, *n* = 15) were between the ages of 30 and 40 years, of which 21.4% (*n* = 6) and 32.1% (*n* = 9) were within the age groups of 30–35 years and 35–40 years, respectively. The importance of the participants' age pertains to the fact that their age can be directly linked to their teaching experience, as is illustrated in the Discussion section, Contextual challenges.

As was expected in this context, most of the participants (96.4%, *n* = 27) indicated that they were proficient in more than one language. English emerged as the language in which all the participants considered themselves to be proficient.

Most of the participants had some form of qualification pertaining to early childhood education (ECE). This varied from a basic childcare certificate to more advanced training for Grade R learners. Based on the responses obtained from the group, it can be deduced that 67.9% (*n* = 19) of the participants were adequately qualified. Furthermore, most of the participants with qualifications received their training at Further Education and Training (FET) colleges (46.4%, *n* = 13).

In agreement with the age distribution, most of the participants (57.1%, *n* = 16) were educators with limited teaching experience as those with 0–5 years' experience were in the majority. Participants younger than 30 years had markedly less teaching experience than those older than 30 years, all of whom had between 5 and 10 years' experience.

The official LoLT in the majority of the ECD centres were English (64.3%, *n* = 18) and Setswana (67.9%, *n* = 19), although most used a combination as English and Setswana as the LoLT. Interestingly almost all the participants indicated that they use *both* English and Setswana during communication interactions in the classroom, even though both languages were not necessarily used as LoLT in all the ECD centres.

The total number of learners in a class was quite varied. Most of the participants (85.7%, *n* = 24) indicated that they had between 10 and 30 learners in a class, with 46.4% (*n* = 13) of

the participants indicating they had 10–20 learners in a class and 39.3% (*n* = 11) indicating they had 20–30 learners in a class.

Early childhood development practitioners' perception of their preparedness to facilitate English as an additional language

Most of the participants (89.3%, *n* = 25) either agreed (60.7%, *n* = 17) or strongly agreed (28.6%, *n* = 8) with the statement that they were well informed about the theories for teaching an additional language during their training. Only 10.7% (*n* = 3) of the participants disagreed with the statement.

Training and support needs of the participants

Training and support needs: Quantitative strand

Table 2 represents the training and support needs indicated by the participants during the quantitative strand of the study.

The participants indicated a need for some form of education in most of the areas listed in the quantitative section of the questionnaire. Only 6.3% (*n* = 2) of the participants were satisfied with the skills they had, and 3.6% (*n* = 1) of the participants did not indicate any training needs. The prevalent areas in which the participants indicated a need included (1) knowledge and advice in areas relating to the acquisition of EAL (96.4%, *n* = 27), (2) assistance with materials to use in language lessons (100%, *n* = 28) and (3) assistance with lesson planning from a

language professional such as a speech-language therapist (89.3%, *n* = 25).

Training and support needs: Qualitative strand

Open-ended questions were used to obtain qualitative data regarding the training needs of the participants. The qualitative results corroborated the findings obtained during the quantitative strand of the study. The themes that emerged are reflected in Table 3.

Most of the participants indicated a need for FET. Several subthemes emerged from this overall theme. This included requests for guidance from other relevant professional people, more qualified staff and more knowledge to enable the educators to have a better understanding of the subjects that they are supposed to teach, to highlight but a few. The second-largest need that was communicated was a need for resources. This varied from a need for equipment to a need for visual aids, playground equipment and other resources.

Discussion

Prevalent factors that impact on historically disadvantaged early childhood development practitioners' abilities to facilitate the acquisition of English as an additional language

The language proficiency of the ECD practitioners, their qualifications and the LoLT used in the classrooms were identified as prevailing factors that may impact on historically disadvantaged ECD practitioners' abilities to facilitate the

TABLE 2: Participants' training needs: Quantitative strand (*n* = 28).

Training and support needs	Agree		Disagree/no response	
	No of participants	%	No of participants	%
Advice on how to handle the EAL learner	27	96.4	1	3.6
Workshops on facilitating English skills in preschool learners	27	96.4	1	3.6
Formal training on language acquisition	27	96.4	1	3.6
Formal training on acquisition of English as an additional language	27	96.4	1	3.6
Training on the acquisition of basic vocabulary in an additional language	0	0.0	0	0.0
Materials to use in language lessons	28	100.0	0	0.0
Advice on how to handle the EAL learner	25	89.3	3	10.7
Assistance by speech-language therapist in planning lessons	19	67.9	4	14.3
Suggestions on how to involve the broader community in the acquisition of an additional language	0	0.0	0	0.0

EAL, English as an additional language.

TABLE 3: Participants' training needs: Qualitative strand (*n* = 28).

Theme	Participant no	Examples of participants' statements
Teaching materials, including equipment, books, newspapers, magazines and other visual aids, sandpit, playground	9, 12, 17, 20, 22, 26, 27, 30, 36	'Equipment and workshops to help the teachers know about this …' (Participant number 9) 'Materials to help us get more knowledge. For when we have knowledge we will be able to teach our children fluently' (Participant number 22)
Guidance from other professionals, including qualified educators	15, 18, 19	'We need more professional teachers' (Participant number 18)
Need for professional development activities; education and training via workshops	14, 16, 20, 25, 26, 27, 34	'We need to hold workshops for educators' (Participant number 14) 'They need training so that they can learn more' (Participant number 20)
More qualified staff	15, 19	'We need more qualified teachers to give more practicals in our centres and study material for children' (Participant number 15)
Resources to monitor children's progress	23	'Really the children might need to be given resources like instruments used in keeping healthy and presenting charts for further illustration of keeping healthy' (Participant number 23)
Programmes	24	'(1) Programmes for them to get the relevant information (2) Programmes for them to know the relevant amount/weight on which children whom are still in preschool need to learn English' (Participant number 24)

acquisition of EAL. These factors were subdivided into language-related challenges and contextual challenges.

Language-related challenges

Although all the participants considered themselves to be proficient in English, it was observed that a number of the participants might not be fully proficient in English as evident from the manner in which they provided explanations in the narrative questionnaire answers. Nel and Müller (2010) reported similar findings whilst investigating the impact of educators' limited English proficiency on English second language learners in South African schools. Most of the participants in that study indicated that they were proficient in English but evaluations of their portfolios showed contradictory findings, as evidence of poor English language proficiency and language error transfer from educator to learner were revealed. Limited English proficiency skills can have an impact on the teaching situation, as it may impede conversational exchanges in the classroom (Du Plessis & Louw 2008). The quality of exposure to English is furthermore vital for improving learners' proficiency, and thus, the educators' aptitude of English will strongly affect the learners' use of EAL (Hugo 2013). It stands to reason that if learners are exposed to a less than ideal model of English, it may adversely affect their acquisition of EAL.

The fact that educators who are not necessarily fully proficient in English are expected to facilitate the EAL skills of their learners is, however, not unique to the current context. The lack of adequately proficient educators to teach through the medium of English has been cited by several authors (Evans & Cleghorn 2014; Hugo & Nieman 2010; Sookrajh & Joshua 2009). Shin (2010) is, however, of the opinion that educators who are still in the process of improving their own English proficiency have certain advantages over fully proficient educators. These include greater, conscious knowledge of grammar; they have language learning experiences that they can share with learners, they can anticipate and prevent language difficulties better, they are more empathetic to the needs and problems of the additional language learners and they can make use of the learner's home language. Taking the current education and language teaching landscape in South Africa into consideration, it has become critical to consider how best to enable *all* educators – regardless of their English proficiency – to assist in promoting the development of functional EAL skills.

The official LoLTs in the participating ECD centres were English or Setswana although most ECD centres used a combination of English and Setswana as LoLT. This outcome is in keeping with that of the 2014 ECD audit report, which stated that most ECD centres in South Africa are likely to teach in the dominant language of the area as well as in English. Based on this finding, one could infer that the educators in this study are cognisant of the importance of teaching learners in their home language. The fact that English is also used at ECD centres in this study could additionally imply that there is an increased awareness of the

benefits of early exposure to the future LoLT. The use of both the home language and English as LoLT is in line with the Department of Basic Education's additive bilingualism stance where ideally, young learners should learn the curriculum through their home language whilst simultaneously learning English. As stated earlier, a number of studies attest to the benefits of home language education. These studies suggest that, where young black African learners have had little exposure to English, the early adoption of English as the sole LoLT is detrimental. It adversely affects the acquisition of both English language and African home language skills, as well as the quality of educational achievement (Heugh 2017).

Contextual challenges

Contextual challenges pertinent to this study included large class sizes and underqualified ECD practitioners. These challenges are regrettably not unique to this study's context, as thousands of schools in South Africa lack the required infrastructure and resources essential for providing learners with the quality education to which they are legally entitled.

The relatively high learner-to-educator ratio in this study is, however, of grave concern, as it is in contrast to the ratios reported in the 2014 ECD audit report (Department of Social Development 2014), which indicated an overall learner-to-educator ratio of below 10 learners to an educator in ECD centres in the Gauteng Province specifically. Lessing and Mahabeer (2007) highlight large class sizes as an immense barrier to the acquisition of English reading and writing skills for learners who have IsiZulu as their home language. They are of the viewpoint that class sizes make it impossible for educators to attend to learners' individual learning needs. This jeopardises the methods advocated by the curriculum assessment policy, which recommends that learners be taught either individually, in pairs or in small groups when needed. These methods allow learners to move through challenging learning areas at their own pace. Large class sizes hinder educators' implementation of most of these methods and leave mostly group and whole-class teaching opportunities. The identification of individual learner problems and learner progression at individual pacing will thus be compromised as the assessments of an individual learner's progress and provision of individual remediation become an almost impossible task for the educators.

Variations in the participants' qualifications could also impact on their ability to facilitate the acquisition of EAL. Based on the responses obtained for the group, 67.9% (*n* = 19) of the participants were adequately qualified. These qualifications, however, varied from a basic childcare certificate to more advanced training for Grade R learners. This finding is in contrast to that of the 2014 ECD audit report, which found that staff qualifications at ECD centres across the country were generally low, with a majority of staff having less than a Grade 12 education. A substantial percentage of the participants (32.1%, *n* = 9), however, still did not have any educator training, which implies that they were not suitably qualified. The inequalities in the qualifications ECD practitioners and

the possible impact thereof on the quality of ECE were highlighted as far back as 2001 in the White Paper 5 (Department of Education 2001:14). Despite this, there is currently still no policy that mandates independent ECD centres to employ ECD practitioners with appropriate qualifications or registration with the South African Council of Educators. Individuals with inappropriate qualifications may, therefore, teach at independent ECD centres.

Most of the participants (46.4%, *n* = 13) with qualifications received their training at FET colleges. Further Education and Training colleges in the post-apartheid era play a crucial role in the provision of the intermediate to higher-level skills required to support growth and development within South Africa (Rasool & Mahembe 2014). In contrast, it has been acknowledged that FET colleges under the apartheid regime were poorly resourced and offered inferior training compared to institutions for white students (Department of Education 2006). As the majority of the qualified participants in this study obtained their qualifications from current accredited FET institutions, one could anticipate that they would be better prepared for teaching compared to their counterparts who obtained qualifications from FET colleges under the previous dispensation. Thus, younger participants with less teaching experience who obtained their qualifications from current accredited FET institutions might still have been better prepared for teaching compared with older participants with more teaching experience who obtained qualifications from FET colleges under the previous dispensation. Schäfer and Wilmot (2012) supported this notion stating that a more equitable and improved system of teacher education has been achieved in post-apartheid South Africa.

It is clear that the professional characteristics of the participants contribute significantly to the complexity of the research context. Despite the fairly homogeneous context, vast differences in terms of the teaching experience and the qualifications of the ECD practitioners will directly impact on their ability to facilitate the acquisition of EAL as well as their individual training needs in this regard. Underqualified or inadequately qualified ECD practitioners might have a poorer knowledge base than those who were adequately qualified. Prior knowledge serves as a framework for the acquisition of new knowledge, which makes training programmes more effective (Wium 2010). Underqualified or inadequately qualified participants might thus be at a disadvantage, as they might not have an adequate knowledge base to aid in the acquisition of new knowledge when training programmes are considered.

Early childhood development practitioners' perception of their preparedness to facilitate the acquisition of English as an additional language

Although most of the participants in this study indicated some exposure to the theories underlying the acquisition of an additional language during their training, they nevertheless indicated a need for knowledge in this regard

during the needs analysis. This may suggest that educators have become aware of gaps in their existing knowledge base. It may also allude to personal challenges that the participants have encountered whilst supporting preschool learners in acquiring EAL. It can thus be inferred that although ECD practitioners in this particular study had exposure to additional language acquisition theories, this exposure might have been limited, and they require continued development in this area. This inference corroborates evidence suggesting that some educators in South Africa lack adequate exposure to the methodological skills to promote effective learning of an additional language (O 'Connor & Geiger 2009), perhaps because they have not had the necessary training. Consequently, few educators have sufficient knowledge of the complex, multidimensional nature of an additional language and the implications thereof for the processes of acquiring and teaching additional languages. The diverse nature of EAL learners demands ECD practitioners who have been adequately prepared and have the pedagogical tools to meet their diverse needs fully. A rudimentary knowledge of the theories underlying the acquisition of an additional language is extremely important as it will directly influence the ability of ECD practitioners to provide appropriate content area instruction to EAL learners (eds. Hugo & Lenyai 2013). It is evident that educators' need for guidance in facilitating and assisting learners with the acquisition of EAL is an on-going process and that there is a need to continually train educators and provide them with increased exposure on issues pertaining to EAL.

Training and support needs

The greatest challenges for the participants in this study appear to be the lack of a quality knowledge base and the lack of a strong support base as is evident in Tables 2 and 3.

The participants' need to increase their knowledge, competence and practical experiences in facilitating the acquisition of EAL suggests that the participants may not be comfortable implementing this educational objective. Additionally, participants might feel that additional experience and knowledge will enable them to support their learners with more confidence, as they will be more secure in their knowledge base. Du Toit, Froneman and Maree (2002) stated that educators are expected to become specialists in their subject fields with sufficient knowledge and skills to teach. The participants' need for support may thus imply that the ECD practitioners are acutely aware of the crucial role they have to play in this regard, and it may also reflect their perception that they cannot meet these expectations, which makes them feel vulnerable and unsure.

Several modes for providing support were identified by the participants. The preferred modes of support included workshops (training component), training support materials (training component) and follow-up visits (mentoring component). This is in line with literature which suggests that educators have a preference for training through workshops rather than lectures (Earley & Bubb 2004) and

with findings by Roberts (2002) that short courses and workshops were the preferred approaches used by districts to improve educators' knowledge and skills. The success of educational programmes directly depends on the extent to which educators are provided with suitable training and support in the participatory teaching methods required for this type of education. Although there are many ways to effectively train educators, Ahmed et al. (2006) described interactive and experiential workshop-type training sessions to be most effective in facilitating educators' ownership of the curriculum. Workshops have also been identified as important 'confidence boosters' (Baxen & Green 1999:264). However, Wium (2010) warned against the effects of 1-day workshops, stating that the gains are often short term and marginal. In order to extend the value of such training, Wium (2010) recommended the inclusion of practical and mentoring

components with reflective elements to support the training component. It is advised that preferences as indicated by the participants along with the recommendations presented by Wium (2010) should guide the development of future support initiatives.

Ways in which support could be delivered to early childhood development practitioners in this context
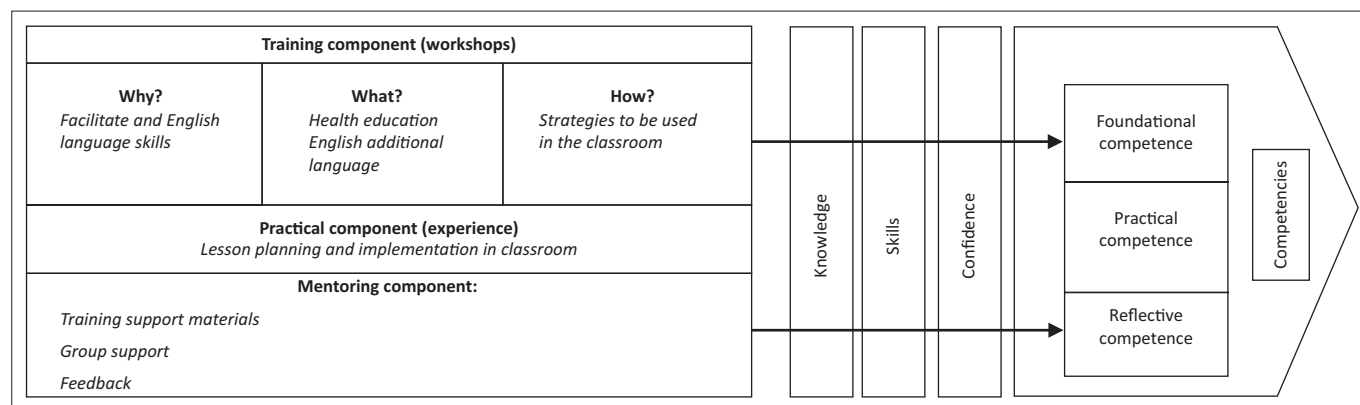
Strengthening and expanding early education requires that various stakeholders should put their collective knowledge into real-life action in addressing the needs and capacities of the ECD practitioners. The results of this study raised several issues to consider whilst investigating opportunities to

TABLE 4: Recommendations and implications to guide future support initiatives.

Key findings and conclusion	Impact	Recommendations	Implications
Prevalent factors that might impact on the ability of ECDP to facilitate the EAL skills of learners:			
Various language-related – and contextual challenges that could affect the outcomes of future support initiatives were identified. Language-related challenges included the English language proficiency of the ECDP and the language of learning and teaching used in the classrooms. Contextual challenges included large class sizes and underqualified ECDP. These factors should be considered when planning support initiatives as they directly affect the teaching, learning and outcomes of such programmes.	The English language proficiency of the participants might affect their ability to be active learners should future courses be presented in English. ECDP furthermore need to provide adequate language models for learners, thus the effect of facilitating EAL skills in these contexts by ECDP who are not necessarily fully proficient in English may have significant implications for teaching and learning (Wium 2010). Lessing and Mahabeer (2007) highlight larger class sizes as an immense barrier to the acquisition of EAL skills as they make it impossible for educators to attend to learners' individual learning needs. The differences in qualifications of the ECDP may result in some respondents entering future support initiatives with a more advanced knowledge base than their counterparts as participants with more advanced qualifications could use their existing knowledge as a framework to support the acquisition of new knowledge.	Trainers need to be flexible in accommodating ECDP with varying levels of prior knowledge and/or academic backgrounds. It may in addition be necessary to provide pre-training of particular terminology and basic concepts related to the programme to trainees with lesser academic qualifications. Alternatively, clear-cut selection criteria will allow for future programmes to be designed for specific groups according to the trainees' educational backgrounds. This should not be seen as exclusionary, but a method by which more appropriate and effective training that suits individual needs could be provided (Wium 2010). In order to address language challenges, future programme coordinators should consider employing research assistants/ fieldworkers who are proficient in the dominant indigenous languages of the geographical areas in which the educator training will be conducted to conduct similar workshops. This will allow for code-switching between English and the home languages of the trainees. Contextual factors such as large class sizes and limited resources are not within the control of programme coordinators and therefore need to be addressed by the principals/owners of the individual schools. Where relevant, class sizes need to be reduced or alternatively, ECDP have to be equipped to manage large classes. ECDP can be provided with strategies to deal with large numbers of learners through skills training and/or classroom assistants, both of which have cost implications.	Findings suggest that it is necessary to take cognisance of the differences in educators' prior knowledge and competence for the purpose of in-service educator development. Findings from the study agree with those of Wium (2010) that indicated that the use of a single in-service programme for a heterogeneous group is not necessarily the most effective manner of support. An approach based on specific selection criteria will allow for programmes to be designed to suit particular needs. Findings also suggest that code-switching is imperative for effective teaching, not only in preschools, but also for adult training programmes within the South African context. Contextual challenges are not unique to the current context as thousands of schools in South Africa lack the required infrastructure and resources essential to providing learners with the quality education they are legally entitled to receive. Factors specifically related to the infrastructure need to be addressed through planning by, for example, school-governing bodies and parent forum meetings, and where relevant, the Department of Basic Education should be involved.
Educators' preparedness to facilitate the English additional language skills of their preschool learners			
Most of the participants in the study had to some degree been prepared to facilitate the EAL skills of preschool learners during their initial training. They had, however, not received any subsequent in-service training in this regard, resulting in an overwhelming majority of the participants indicating a need for more knowledge in this regard during the needs analysis. One can thus deduce that they were aware of their knowledge gaps and were keen to address these gaps	As the respondents acknowledged their need for support, it is reasonable to expect them to cooperate positively during future educator training interventions.	This finding accentuated the necessity of determining the exact nature of participants' prior knowledge in order to avoid duplicating existing knowledge in proposed programmes. Based on these findings, facilitators can then provide revision of specified knowledge areas and particular terminology and basic concepts as identified. It is crucial that training programmes must be designed according to the trainees' educational backgrounds so as to address the specific areas identified as challenging by trainees.	Although the majority of the respondents had to some degree been prepared to facilitate the EAL skills of preschool learners during their initial training, the importance of a continuous supportive environment to educators through the provision of intensive in-service training programmes is highlighted by this finding.
ECD practitioners' training and support needs			
The findings confirmed that the ECDP experienced a need to increase their knowledge and competence to facilitate the EAL skills of their learners. In addition to this, the ECDP communicated a need for resources to assist them in facilitating EAL skills of their learners. These findings emphasise the need of future support initiatives to address the needs identified by supporting educators in a manner that takes their unique prior knowledge and skills into consideration.	The participants will be highly motivated to learn because they communicated a need for more knowledge.	The results of the needs analysis emphasised the importance of developing educator training workshops in order to address the needs identified. It also highlighted the need for various stakeholders to work within a consultative and collaborative framework to provide support to those in the educational context.	The value and need of focussing on endeavours that aim to prevent communicative disabilities were emphasised by this finding. In South Africa particularly, there is a need to develop the ECDP content knowledge relating the acquisition of EAL. The provision of learning support material that is ready to use is also highlighted by this study.

EAL, English as an additional language; ECDP, early childhood development practitioners.

Source: Wium, A.M., 2010, 'The development of a support programme for foundation phase teachers to facilitate listening and language for numeracy', Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria, Pretoria

FIGURE 1: Three-pronged approach to educator support.

empower ECD practitioners with the ability to facilitate the EAL skills of their learners. Table 4 provides a summary of these issues, using the key findings of the study and the impact thereof to formulate recommendations and implications, which can guide future support initiatives in this regard.

On a more practical level, the three-pronged approach to educator support (Wium 2010) could be used to drive support initiatives to ECD practitioners in this context. The model comprises three basic components, namely training, practical and mentoring components. These components are intended to augment one another in empowering ECD practitioners to facilitate the acquisition of EAL. Not only does it equip educators with content knowledge and skills to facilitate learning but it also provides educators with the opportunity to reflect on their practices, which promotes professional growth. Figure 1 depicts this model.

The training component of the model focuses on the acquisition of foundational competence. It could consist of workshops/short courses founded on principles of adult learning and focussing on subject knowledge related to the 'why?' 'what?' and 'how?' of acquiring EAL. During the practical component of the model, ECD practitioners can be expected to implement strategies in the classroom as was specified during the training component. The aim of this component will be to facilitate skills acquisition in order to develop the ECD practitioners' practical competence in the facilitation of EAL. Lastly, the mentoring component could include focus group discussions and classroom observations aimed at developing the reflective competence of the participants (Wium 2010).

Conclusion

This study provided insight into how the professional profile of the ECD practitioners in a historically disadvantaged setting may impact on their ability to facilitate the acquisition of EAL. It explored the ECD practitioners' perceptions of their preparedness to facilitate the acquisition of EAL and determined the training and support needs of the ECD practitioners in this regard. Several prevailing factors related to the ECD practitioners, the context and the language used, which could affect their ability to facilitate the acquisition of EAL, were identified and discussed. It is clear that there is an urgent need to develop support structures to assist ECD practitioners in the specified context in this regard, and the result of the study can serve as a starting point for planning workshops where ECD practitioners can be trained to develop suitable lesson plans and resources as well as appropriate techniques to enhance preschool learners' acquisition of EAL. The results could additionally provide direction for future research priorities aimed at developing and promoting the EAL skills of preschool learners in the developing contexts of South Africa. It is encouraging to note that although the detrimental effects of apartheid are still prevalent in ECD centres in this context, as is evident by the number of ECD practitioners without any qualifications, the ECD practitioners in the context acknowledge that they require additional knowledge and support. This particular study can be considered necessary and relevant and could serve as an initial step in the direction of bringing about change in how ECD practitioners facilitate the EAL skills of their learners.

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Authors' contributions

C.M. was responsible for the conceptualisation, planning, design, drafting, data collection, analysis and editing. H.v.d.H. was responsible for the conceptualisation, planning and editing and was the supervisor of the original research. S.d.P. was responsible for the conceptualisation, planning and editing and was the co-supervisor of the original research.

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