

Creating inspired ECD teachers

To build a well-educated we need passionate and engaged teachers, and early childhood is the foundation for all such educational development

A simple, yet powerful game-changing strategy that will have a significant impact in the lives of young children in South Africa is to create an inspired, passionate, informed and skilled cadre of ECD teachers. Teachers/practitioners/care givers who know what an awesome responsibility it is to teach babies, toddlers and young children; teachers who are confident and proud to be a preschool teacher.

This is currently not the reality for the majority of those working in the ECD field. It is a sector that is characterised by low morale, low self-esteem, inadequate relevant training, poor salaries and poor conditions of service. Speaking with preschool teachers, conversations are sprinkled with self-derogatory comments and many who seek to improve their qualifications aspire to leave the ECD field to teach in the Foundation Phase for a better salary and status.

General public perceptions endorse this image of the preschool teacher as a lowly caregiver doing work that can be undertaken by anyone who likes babies, toddlers and young children and who keeps them clean, fed and happy.

Imagine the impact that could be made in the lives of young children by changing these perceptions. For instance, one inspired ECD teacher impacts on between six and 30 children and their families every year. Multiplied over the span of 20 to 30 years, this single individual could be a major catalyst for positive change in their communities and further afield.

ECD is a complex and multi-faceted field with many disciplines being interwoven. At the heart of the successful delivery of ECD services is



the empowerment and professionalisation of those working with young children, including children's first teachers.

One of the simplest, most cost-effective and sustainable steps that could be taken focuses on enhancing the confidence and dignity of preschool teachers, practitioners and carers in programmes designed to increase ECD knowledge and skills. This should be supported by a campaign to raise awareness of the important role that the ECD teacher could play in the future of our nation.

The ECD teacher is in a pivotal position to enhance the learning and care of young children, their parents and the community. An effective ECD teacher understands that learning is unique and, in addition, such an

ideal individual should be someone who is fascinated with the multitude of ways young children learn and develop. She should also be curious to know more and provide more meaningful learning experiences.

She understands that her role is not as 'teacher' in the traditional sense of the word but, rather, she should see herself as a co-facilitator of learning. She knows that exploration through play is the avenue through which children learn and, consequently, she will plan and provide the type of environment and experiences that will maximise these opportunities. She continually reflects on her own attitudes, practice and learning and that of the children and their parents.

A truly effective ECD teacher values and develops mutually respectful relationships with parents and other key stakeholders. There is an understanding of the importance of working together and sharing responsibility for education and care. There is respect for the individual child and family but, at the same time, also an appreciation for the context and culture of the preschool and the community.

A universal challenge for ECD teachers is the general lack of knowledge and understanding of the way young children learn and develop. Demands are placed on ECD teachers to 'teach' and produce evidence of the children's 'work'. This translates into very young children engaged for extended periods of time in completing worksheet type activities in order that they will be ready for school. There is little value placed on children being active and exploring, experimenting, creating, testing and finding solutions. The development of the foundational concepts on which mathematics, language and life skills are built is compromised for young children who are denied opportunities to learn through play.

Early development

It is during the first few years of life when the brain is rapidly developing connections and circuits that the architecture for learning is created. Genetics play a vital role, but research shows that early experiences also impact on future learning in all areas including mathematics, language, creative, social and emotional skills.

The quality of relationships and interaction of teacher and child, teacher and parents and teamwork are essential components for optimum learning and development. Teachers require ECD-specific training in order to be able to plan, provide, mediate and evaluate activities, experiences and contexts that are developmentally appropriate.

There is a clear need to attract individuals to a career in ECD. However, this poses a major challenge as teachers in preschools are not recognised by the Department of Education or the Department of Social Development for salary purposes. Remuneration is determined by the management body of the preschool and are purely dependent on income from fees paid by parents. With the prospect of high tuition fees, low salary prospects coupled with long hours and low status it is not a popular or attractive profession

Awareness of these factors would generate a demand and investment in better quality ECD care and provision by suitably qualified, motivated and skilled staff.

Until the role of the preschool teacher is valued and recompensed at a market-related rate, the quality of ECD provision will be compromised.

Game-changers

To improve the quality of teaching and learning for young children, a starting point should focus on training and upgrading the qualifications of currently employed ECD teachers. All available accredited service providers and colleges could be involved. Many ECD teachers who are currently employed in preschools are women who have a passion for teaching young children, but have little or no formal training. These teachers require opportunities and support to gain additional knowledge and skills. A variety of courses should be available including opportunities to complete Senior Certificate, do short skills training courses and embark on a course to an ECD qualification.

As the majority of these women are dependent on their income to support themselves and their families, training should be offered part-time either through contact sessions or distance learning. The business world could become involved by providing financial support in the form of bursaries or subsidies for training and require evidence of improved implementation in the workplace. Improved qualifications should be recognised by an increase in salary. As one of the aims in improving qualifications is the retention of skilled teachers in the phase, negotiations with Higher Education for credit recognition to continue their studies is important.

In the short-term, better trained, skilled and more confident personnel will create optimal learning environments and provide a better quality of education and care for young children. This will result in greater parent satisfaction, increased enrolment and more financial stability for the ECD centre/preschool.

The next step should include identifying inspirational, well-trained ECD teachers to become mentors to others. The schools at which they are teaching could become centres of excellence to be utilised to demonstrate good practice and offer support to other ECD trainee teachers. ▲

JILL SACHS



Jill Sachs has been the director of the Caversham Education Institute for the past decade. The organisation offers, part-time training to Early Childhood teachers in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, and its primary focus is to provide a practical, professional, recognised qualification, at NQF level 5, that equips teachers of children birth to five, to become agents of transformation in their classes and communities. She previously served with the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education for 10 years in the position of Deputy Chief Education Specialist: ECD and was honoured as ECD Pioneer for her outstanding contribution in the province.