



The project on Early Childhood Development leadership training in rural area of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the Pedagogical Leadership Training Project aimed at enhancing leadership in rural Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in South Africa. It addresses the prevalent economic-focused leadership that neglects pedagogical issues, hindering access to government funding and regulatory compliance. The research explores the need for professional development of ECD leaders and their learning experiences through the project. Using an iterative, cyclical approach aligned with action research principles, the study includes pre- and post-training surveys to gather demographic, job-related, and management information, and refine training sessions based on feedback. The findings highlight the critical role of ECD leaders in educational and administrative capacities, emphasising the necessity of leadership development and its impact on improving competencies. The study underscores the importance of pedagogical leadership in fostering quality education and effective management, advocating for government support, improved funding, and comprehensive training frameworks to enhance ECD practices in South Africa.

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Introduction

Recent studies have shown that leadership has a significant effect on teachers' work as well as on children's learning and well-being in early childhood education (Fonsén, Ahtiainen, et al. 2022; Keung et al. 2019). In particular, pedagogical leadership supports children's learning, development, and well-being by enhancing human capital in organisations and facilitating teachers' professional development (Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola 2019; Sergiovanni 1998). Furthermore, a distributed leadership style strengthens teachers' professionalism and pedagogical leadership by establishing a shared vision of pedagogy, thereby empowering teachers to implement high-quality pedagogy (Fonsén and Ukkonen-

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Mikkola 2019; Heikka 2014; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2020). Notably, pedagogical leadership relates not only to the pedagogical content in educational work but also to structural and contextual factors. Politics and leaders in the field of education also need to clearly understand matters pertaining to sufficient resources and functional structures to achieve high-quality education (Tirri et al. 2021).

In this context, early childhood development (ECD) leaders who implement ECD programmes are expected to be knowledgeable and skilled in providing a quality learning environment for practitioners and young children. According to Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake (2016), strong pedagogical leadership is integral to offering high-quality care and education to young children. In this regard, ECD leaders play a critical role because they are responsible for pedagogical implementation and planning as well as coordination with parents and other ECD stakeholders.

In South Africa, many community ECD centres have remained unregistered and face exclusion from government funding and regulatory compliance – a situation that has been recognised as a nationwide problem (Solomon 2023). The leaders of these ECD centres lack pedagogical knowledge and adopt a predominantly economic management style of leadership that focuses primarily on financial matters rather than pedagogical issues (Matjokana 2021). This indicates a disconnect between leadership orientation and the educational objectives of ECD. Modise (2019) reinforced this claim by emphasising the imperative for leaders to redirect their focus towards teaching and learning, thereby enhancing their efficacy in fulfilling their pedagogical leadership responsibilities. According to Matjokana (2021), there is an urgent need to re-evaluate leadership priorities to better align them with the educational needs of ECD. To enhance ECD programmes, it is crucial to improve leadership, secure government funding, employ effective fundraising, and encourage parental involvement and pedagogical leadership for sustainable early learning. Moreover, investment in training ECD leaders can also improve pedagogical practices and ECD services. Through research, training, and professional support, ECD leaders can be offered an opportunity to autonomously create efficient and sustainable learning environments as well as favourable working conditions for their staff.

This article introduces the Pedagogical Leadership Training Project, aimed at improving rural ECD community centres in South Africa, and presents the findings of an action research study conducted within the framework of this project with an empowerment purpose (Fetterman 2015). The aim of this research was to investigate the need for the professional development of ECD leaders and the learning experience gained through the leadership training provided in our project.

Pedagogical leadership

Leadership has been identified as one of the key issues pertaining to high-quality education (Fonsén and Lahtero 2024). Notably, various theories have been proposed in an attempt to explain the concept of leadership from various perspectives. Some researchers have investigated leadership through the lens of practice rather than theory. In contrast to understanding leadership through various models, it can also be viewed as a praxis in which policy, social realities and educational outcomes are highly interconnected (Male and Palaiologou 2015). Johns (2023) argued that, overall, leadership research and theory should be more context-forward and appreciative of context. Pedagogical leadership has

been recognised as an effective means to enhance the quality of education (Male and Palaiologou 2017) that takes account of both the context and the theoretical aspects of leadership. Therefore, in this study, we employ the theoretical perspective of pedagogical leadership as the basis of our inspection of ECD leadership (Fonsén 2013, 2014; T. J. Lahtero and Salonen 2022).

The impact of contextual factors can be observed beginning at the macro level. National laws, norms, and values have significant effects on leadership, especially pedagogical leadership (Fonsén 2013, 2014). Government and municipality administrations largely determine the resources and regulations that will be drawn up for the education system, thus mutually affecting the level of education quality. In our previous research (Fonsén et al. 2023; TENK 2023), we identified the impact of national, cultural, and situational aspects, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on leadership. It was observed that the effects of cultural values and norms not only persist but may also strengthen in challenging times (Fonsén et al. 2024; Fonsén et al. 2023). Furthermore, organisational structures at the micro level either enable or prevent the implementation of good pedagogical leadership. For instance, if the responsibility areas of a leader are spread out too widely, the leader's working time would be dedicated to management and administrative duties, leaving no time for discussions on pedagogical issues (Hujala and Eskelinen 2013; Turani 2022). Therefore, one of the most important aspects of pedagogical leadership is organisational culture (Fonsén and Lahtero 2024; Sergiovanni 1998). By empowering teachers to participate in pedagogical leadership, leaders can enhance not only the collaborative atmosphere of the organisation but also the shared vision and mission of pedagogy (Douglass 2018; Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016). In this context, distributed leadership has been examined to increase positive relationships, organisational commitment, and educational improvement (Hickey, Flaherty, and Mannix McNamara 2022).

Leaders must be able to act as both professional leaders and experts in education. In addition, they must be able to perform all kinds of management and administrative tasks, such as human resource management, budgeting, administrative duties, and so on (T. J. Lahtero and Salonen 2022; Turani 2022). Simultaneously, in terms of their basic educational background, leaders must possess educational knowledge drawn from teacher training or other kinds of educational training. Most of all, leaders seeing the value of pedagogical aspects in all the decisions they make is a key determiner of good pedagogical leadership (Fonsén 2013, 2014; Fonsén and Lahtero 2024).

Recently, a model of broad-based pedagogical leadership has emerged within the framework of basic education (T. Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015; T. J. Lahtero and Salonen 2022). This model interprets leadership as either direct or indirect, incorporating a cultural dimension into it. Direct pedagogical leadership centres on the learning and teaching process (Fonsén and Lahtero 2024), and involves providing direct guidance and support, both in everyday school life and during development discussions, to enhance staff's competence and learning (Alava, Halttunen, and Risku 2012). Conversely, pedagogical leadership through technical leadership (such as creating structures in the organisation, scheduling, and coordination) and human resource leadership (addressing psychological factors, motivation, and well-being) operates indirectly (T. J. Lahtero and Salonen 2022). Technical, pedagogical, and human resource leadership are the foundations of competent leadership (Fonsén, Ahtiainen, et al. 2022; T. Lahtero and Kuusilehto-

Awale 2015). In the current study, we explore the importance of the overall development of leadership and management in ECD, using broad-based pedagogical leadership as the theoretical perspective for the investigation.

Context of ECD in South Africa

In South Africa, ECD plays a vital role in shaping children's future success and accomplishments, as it lays the foundation for their growth and development. ECD encompasses the period from the birth of a child to the age of eight, focusing on the holistic development of children during these critical early years (Department of Social Development 2015). The government in South Africa has acknowledged the significance of ECD, putting forward a range of policies and initiatives to promote access to quality ECD services (Ross 2019). Moreover, registering with the ECD authority in South Africa is pivotal to ensuring the quality and uniformity of services provided during early development. Notably, centres and facilities are usually required to meet the norms and standards established by regulatory bodies to attain registration.

Legal framework and policies on registration and funding for ECD

The legal framework of ECD is outlined in the South African Constitution of 1996 and the Children's Act 38 of 2005, both of which emphasise the best interest of the child to be a primary concern (Children's Act 38 2005; Republic of South Africa 1996). Furthermore, the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECD) outlines a comprehensive package of quality ECD services covering healthcare, nutrition, social protection, parent support, and learning opportunities (Republic of South Africa 2015). The aforementioned policies and regulatory frameworks established by local and provincial departments define the quality standards for appropriate infrastructure to safeguard the well-being and interests of children, especially vulnerable children (Biersteker, Berry, and Gwele 2022; Matjokana 2023). These initiatives aim to expand access to early childhood care and development in South Africa, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised children (Department of Social Development 2015). Notably, successful implementation of the aforesaid policies necessitates adequate financial and human resources, with a focus on allocating funds for equitable access to quality ECD programmes and prioritising disadvantaged children.

However, the norms, standards, and registration requirements established by the Department of Social Development (DSD) have impeded rural ECD centres from securing funding to access quality ECD services. Moreover, the National Building Regulations and Building Standard Act No. 103 of 1977 mandate strict compliance for ECD centre registration, which requires rezoned facilities and "fire safety approved" plans, further disadvantageous to the ECD centres located in marginalised communities (Van der Walt, De Beer, and Swart 2014). Therefore, unfortunately, these stringent requirements affect the provision of training in pedagogical knowledge, quality leadership, and the learning environment in rural ECD centres. In other words, under-resourced ECD centres, often located in rural areas, lack government support primarily because they fail to meet stringent DSD registration standards, thus exacerbating the challenges encountered by these facilities

(Baloyi and Makhubele 2018; Matjokana 2023). Furthermore, such ECD centres also face persistent structural challenges, such as insufficient training for leaders and practitioners, a skill gap in pedagogical knowledge and leadership, and infrastructure deficiencies, which impede the effective delivery of comprehensive care and a robust education programme (Baloyi and Makhubele 2018; Matjokana 2021).

Government support discrepancies

According to a report by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in the ECD 2021 Census, significant progress has been made in improving ECD programmes in South Africa since 1994. Nonetheless, the sector continues to face multiple obstacles, including concerns regarding infrastructure, programme quality, leaders' qualifications and training, as well as the institutional capacity for ECD registration and funding (Independent Online 2022). The 2021 Census showed that 40% of Early Learning Programmes in South Africa were registered with the DSD, while 42% were unregistered, surpassing previous estimates of the 2001 and 2013 audits. Despite an increase in the number of ECD centres since the previous national audit conducted in 2013, ECD leaders and practitioners were found to be deficient in necessary ECD training and qualifications. It was also noted that a majority of ECD centre leaders had assumed their roles as owners rather than by holding formal qualifications or undergoing training as principals (Chikwanda, Bayat, and Madyibi 2022; Independent Online 2022).

Unregistered ECD centres, particularly in rural areas, often face infrastructure deficiencies, which in turn impact young children's education and care as a result of limited teaching and learning material. This absence of quality training and resources for ECD leaders and practitioners puts young children enrolled in these centres at risk of failing to reach their full potential. Notably, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2015) has also emphasised the importance of quality training for ECD practitioners. However, in South Africa, leaders and practitioners not only lack the necessary qualifications but also operate in under-resourced facilities, thus hindering policy implementation. Moreover, as emphasised by Matjokana (2023), they often lack support from the Department of Social Development (DSD) and Department of Basic Education (DBE), primarily due to non-compliance with registration requirements. Under such circumstances, government, private, and public sector interventions are necessary to address the above mentioned issues and ensure the holistic development of children in ECD centres.

Research questions

The aim of this research was to investigate the need for the professional development of ECD leaders and the learning experience gained through the leadership training provided in our project. Therefore, the primary research questions investigated in this study are as follow:

- (1) What is the necessity of developing leadership and management according to ECD leaders?
- (2) What have the ECD leaders learned from the leadership training provided to them?

Methodology

In this study, we employed a qualitative action research methodology (Shani 2021) to understand and interpret the complex social phenomena encountered by ECD centre leaders by exploring subjective meanings and perspectives within their natural context (see Denzin and Lincoln 2018). This is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which emphasises the importance of understanding the social world from the viewpoint of those being studied, aiming to uncover the richness and depth of human experiences (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Therefore, in this study, the researchers were actively involved in the research process. The interpretative paradigm underpinning qualitative research encourages researchers to explore the meanings and interpretations that participants assign to their experiences. In other words, this paradigm acknowledges the subjective nature of reality and seeks to uncover the various ways in which individuals construct and confer meaning on their lived experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2018).

The iterative nature of the action research methodology allowed for dynamic exploration. In addition to this approach, questionnaires were also implemented in the course of the project. A short survey was first used to determine the participants' prerequisites, challenges and needs. For this purpose, demographic (e.g. age, gender) and job-related information (e.g. training, work experience) was surveyed. In addition, structural information from the centres (e.g. funding, registration) was also recorded. In a second part of the questionnaire, open-ended questions were used to ask about management experience in various areas (e.g. supervision, cooperation) as well as participants' explicit needs. On the one hand, this information was used to record the level of knowledge, skills and needs of the participants and, on the other hand, to tailor the training to these aspects and identify topics that are highly relevant to the target group.

In each training session that we implemented according to the first phase of the analysis, participants were additionally provided with post-training questionnaires. This enabled them to offer additional insights and reflections related to the training, as they absorbed new knowledge. This cyclical approach, consistent with action research principles, not only facilitated ongoing refinement based on participant feedback but also promoted a collaborative environment for co-creating knowledge (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Stringer 2014). Moreover, the comprehensive research design of this study, tailored to the specific needs of early childhood centre leaders in rural South Africa, is poised not only to contribute to a deeper understanding of their challenges but also to facilitate the active improvement of their professional capacities and empowerment purpose (Chambers 2015; Fetterman 2015).

Conducting the study

In the first phase of this study, an online-survey was sent to the participants at the beginning of January 2023. All participants were leaders ($N = 40$) of ECD centres located in the rural area of Hammanskraal in South Africa. The questions in the survey inquired about the current conditions in the ECD centre and the possible need for support in terms of management and leadership. The participants' work experience in the ECD sector ranged from 3 to 27 years, and their age range was between 26 and 69 years. The leaders,

all of whom were female, were mainly the owners of the ECD centres. Notably, the ECD leaders stated that they had not received any leadership training.

In the second phase of this study, the research process unfolded in the form of distinct training sessions designed based on the survey results, each addressing specific content areas. The participants joined the training on site at the University of South Africa and the University of Pretoria, where they were assisted by the researchers in terms of leading discussions. The training (6 hours per day) included one hour of expert lessons (online) and a small group work. After each session, the participants were asked to discuss the contents of the session and provide feedback on the training they received by writing it down in their respective learning diaries. The goal of using learning diaries was to encourage the participants to document what they had learned in the training session and note down its practical implications for them. The following questions were asked in the learning diaries:

- (1) What have you learned about ECD leadership in this training session?
- (2) What practical implications did the training session have for you? Can you use/ implement something from the training in your work? If yes, which aspects of your work will be benefited?

The total number of diaries was 34: 18 from the first training session, 7 from the second training session, and 9 from the third training session. To tailor the training sessions according to the needs of the participants, evaluation forms were handed out to them.

Analysis

The data gathered from the survey were analysed in February 2023 by conducting thematic analysis. For the analysis, we grouped the self-reflections of the ECD leaders regarding their experience with different aspects of service provision, such as developing and implementing programmes, supervising staff, relationships with parents, managing committees, managing the physical environment, and managing finances, among other aspects.

The data from the diaries were analysed through directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), employing a methodology grounded in relevant theories and prior research. Notably, the analytical process adopted in this study drew on theories of pedagogical leadership (Fonsén 2014; Fonsén and Lahtero 2024) and distributed leadership (Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016). Initially, we identified the key concepts and variables to create coding categories (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) in the ATLAS.ti programme. For instance, the concept of leading human resources (Fonsén and Lahtero 2024) directed our attention to the psychological aspects of leadership, such as motivating and focusing on the well-being of staff.

However, the potential limitations of this deductive approach must be acknowledged. Relying heavily on a theoretical framework risks limiting the presentation of results to predefined categories or variables, which “can blind the researchers to

contextual aspects of the phenomenon” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1284). Therefore, the results of this study are discussed in a manner that goes beyond the analytical categories to exhibit the connection to the research context and the specific South African operational environment.

Results

Survey results and training design

The results indicated that the surveyed ECD leaders felt motivated to ensure the growth and development of their centres. One of them shared their goal of *“the center to be the best and of good standard, where children are developed holistically”* and getting government funding: *“My ECD can be in good condition if I can get funding from the government.”* This was also the primary focus of their own learning – be better educated in finances and learn how to fundraise successfully.

The ECD leaders’ responses allowed us to construct a challenging context in which the centres operate. The leaders described that the parents in their centres were mostly unemployed and relied on child support grants, due to which they sometimes fail to pay for ECD services. In addition, staff fatigue and anxiety were mentioned while describing issues pertaining to their overworked staff, who worked for more than 10 hours daily. This indicates that staff qualifications for ECD and staff preparedness need to be strengthened to ensure the development of children.

In the context of this study, a leader’s responsibility would be to take the lead when working in partnership with parents, thus modelling good practice (Moylett et al. 2006). The ECD leaders who participated in the pre-study recognised the need to maintain a good relationship with parents. However, the leaders also shared the challenges of involving parents in the decision-making activities of management committees pertaining to strengthening “parents’ interest in the ECD activities” and “getting parents to cooperate”. These factors contributed to additional pressure on leaders in terms of enacting their leadership. Considering the importance of being adequately trained in leadership issues (Modise 2019), these challenges were accounted for when planning the professional development programmes to help ECD leaders strengthen their leadership skills.

Leadership has often been described as containing various roles (Hujala and Eskelinen 2013). The ECD leaders perceived their roles in leading the centres as a combination of technical leadership (planning and holding meetings of management committees, managing and monitoring physical resources and funds, organising fundraising activities), human resource leadership (managing and supervising staff, communicating with staff),

Table 1. Training schedule and content.

19 May 2023	General introduction to leadership and a comparison of the recent international research on leadership
9 June 2023	Registration and funding of ECD centers in South Africa
11 August 2023	(a) Ability to facilitate parental involvement (b) Knowledge and skills related to pedagogical leadership

Table 2. Results from learning diaries.

Distributed Leadership		
Democratic leadership Delegating leadership tasks Teacher leadership Participative practices		
Indirect Pedagogical Leadership via Technical Leadership	Direct Pedagogical Leadership	Indirect Pedagogical Leadership via Leading Human resources
Planning Organizing Carrying out financial tasks Applying for funding Following norms and laws	Creating a vision Competence/knowledge related to ECD Leading an ECD program/curriculum Guiding toward shared goals Assessing practice Understanding learning methods Advocating for the field of ECD	Motivating staff Inspiring staff Supporting staff Investing in staff well-being Leading human capital Leading staff performance/professional development needs Investing in relationships and collaboration Creating a positive culture

and pedagogical leadership (ensuring that children are taught according to the national curriculum framework based on their ages) (see T. J. Lahtero and Salonen 2022).

Subsequently, in March 2023, the contents of the training were designed according to the results of the survey. The survey findings highlighted the specific needs of the ECD leaders, which formed the basis of the training programme, as presented below in Table 1.

Results from learning diaries

The effects of the lessons provided during training were analysed utilising broad-based pedagogical leadership theory (Fonsén and Lahtero 2024) and distributed leadership theory (Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016). The broad-based pedagogical leadership is divided into direct pedagogical leadership, indirect technical leadership, and indirect human resource leadership. Table 2 presents the compiled results drawn from the learning journals of the ECD leaders, organised in accordance with the framework of broad-based pedagogical leadership (Fonsén and Lahtero 2024). The results focus particularly on the areas of direct and indirect pedagogical leadership (T. J. Lahtero and Laasonen 2021) as well as distributed leadership (Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016; Hickey, Flaherty, and Mannix McNamara 2022) derived from the documented learning experiences of the ECD leaders. Table 2 provides summaries of these learning areas, offering valuable insights into pedagogical ECD leadership development for ensuring high-quality education (Male and Palaiologou 2017).

Distributed leadership

In the learning diaries, the leaders expressed the perspectives they gained about distributed leadership as a result of the training. They described distributed leadership from the viewpoint of democratic leadership and delegation – for instance, the role of the teacher as a pedagogical leader (see Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016):

I have learned that a democratic way of leading is a focus. (D1: ID 14)

[I have learned] The ability to delegate and manage tasks effectively. (D1: ID 7)

A teacher should lead the teaching and learning process. (D1: ID 18)

Additionally, the reflections of the participants included their perspectives on participatory collaboration. The training facilitated a deeper understanding and appreciation of the principles of distributed leadership among the leaders, which encouraged them to embrace collaborative practices. Furthermore, they emphasised the importance of fostering a culture of inclusivity and participation where every member of the team feels valued enough to contribute their ideas and insights. Such an approach enhances commitment among all stakeholders, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes:

Brainstorm different ideas that give one the opportunity to participate and meet with co-workers. (D1: ID 2)

Indirect pedagogical leadership via technical leadership

In the learning diaries, leaders described various tasks related to technical leadership (see T. J. Lahtero and Salonen 2022), mentioning how they had learned to create employee training plans and financial plans, as well as strategies to plan and organise their own work:

My days are organized and planned. I manage to accomplish all my activities in the time I have available. I work strictly according to a diary system, as far as my daily activities are concerned. I plan my activities and daily tasks in advance. (D1: ID 14)

Indirect pedagogical leadership, including finance-related tasks such as fundraising, was also mentioned by the participants. The ECD leaders outlined the components of technical leadership, including the ability to understand and adhere to the laws and norms of South Africa for fundraising and to possess a basic understanding of finance:

I must depend on records and financial statements to know the condition of my business. I must have a basic understanding of finance. (D1: ID 15)

The learning diaries from the second training session underscored the leaders' enhanced understanding of the various processes involved in applying for funding. They highlighted the municipality's crucial role, noting that acquiring all necessary health certificates and rights to land use would be impossible without its involvement (see Matjokana 2021, 2023). Moreover, they realised that it is the leader's responsibility to procure these essential approvals from the municipality, emphasising ECD leaders' accountability in the process:

I have learned that to qualify for ECD funding, you must comply with the prescribed national norms and standards. Consult the local authority (municipality) to obtain the right to use land and the necessary health clearance certificate to run the center in a particular place. (D2: ID6)

Moreover, the reflections also highlighted the leaders' understanding of the complexities and nuances that they have to navigate within these processes, shedding light on the various government sectors with which they engage. Notably, this underscores the

leader's significant responsibility in handling fundamental aspects, such as securing essential permits for operations, emphasising the pivotal role that leaders play in ensuring the organisation's compliance and legitimacy:

When registering with government sectors, e.g., social dev. (Department of Social Development) and DBE (Department of Basic Education), there are procedures to be followed. Be in contact with officials and comply. As ECD's principals, we must raise funds to boost any centers. I have learned about other policies that I was not aware of, e.g., cell phone policy, etc. (D2: ID3)

In addition to acquiring permits, inspectors visit ECD centres to ensure that necessary measures are in place, further highlighting the careful attention to detail required from ECD leaders in meeting regulatory standards:

I have learned that you must first have an NPO (non-profit organization) so that you can apply for a social grant. You need to get help from social workers from social development to come and inspect your ECD. Your area forum inspector will visit your site to inspect and verify it meets the requirements for establishing an ECD center. (D2: ID1)

Direct pedagogical leadership

The ECD leaders emphasised that leadership extends beyond mere management to include aspects of direct pedagogical leadership (T. J. Lahtero and Laasonen 2021). They described that leaders are the creators of vision who must keep teams aligned and working towards targeted goals:

I have learned that leadership is more than just management; it requires good operative creation of vision and motivation to focus on reaching targeted goals. (D1:ID 2)

The leaders also documented the practical benefits that they derived from the training, especially concerning pedagogical leadership, in their learning journals. Among the insights they gained was the creation of a positive culture and inspiring staff to achieve goals. Additionally, they illustrated that the role of a leader also involves advocating for the ECD field (see Fonsén 2014):

Through leadership skill training, managers can learn how to create a vision for their team and how to inspire others to achieve it. An effective leader sets the tone for the entire program and creates a positive culture that fosters growth and learning for the community. They are also advocates for the early childhood education field. (D1: ID 9)

Furthermore, the ECD leaders highlighted the advantages of the training and described the ways in which it supported the development of their ECD competence, which is particularly essential to ensure the utilisation of the leaders' enhanced capabilities to assess and monitor a child's progress in learning development:

[The training] Helps me determine the extent to which a child's functioning on each outcome is appropriate given his or her age—whether the child made progress toward age-appropriate behavior. This can have a positive impact on a child and improve future opportunities, health to the child, this also helps the child to make friends, develop independence and learn new routines. It also supports their transition to school. (D1: ID 10)

Indirect pedagogical leadership via leading human resources

In their learning diaries, the participants placed particular emphasis on leading human resources (see T. J. Lahtero and Salonen 2022; Modise 2019). For instance, the leaders emphasised their commitment to motivating and inspiring their staff, as well as the importance of a leader's role as being more of that of a coach. These reflections underscore the psychological aspects of leadership (Fonsén and Lahtero 2024), highlighting a deeper understanding of their significance in leadership among the ECD leaders:

In general, the role of a leader is to coach, guide, and inspire others. They motivate teams through challenging times and guide individuals through their career progressions. A leader manages individuals to keep teams aligned and work towards shared goals. (D1: ID17)

In particular, the leaders highlighted their role in encouraging staff and addressing their performance and professional development needs. This aspect of leadership was considered pivotal in fostering a positive work environment and ensuring the growth and effectiveness of ECD centres. Moreover, their reflections highlighted the importance of fostering a culture of continuous learning and support within organisations, emphasising the leader's instrumental role in shaping the professional development journey of the staff:

An effective leader in ECD is a leader who has the ability to create a positive nurturing and stimulating environment for children to learn and grow. Leaders should focus on building effective relationships and supporting effective teaching and learning by encouraging and enabling teachers to grow in their teaching practice through professional learning. (D1: ID5)

The leaders acknowledged that salary alone would not be sufficient for job satisfaction – while employees seek fair compensation, true fulfilment requires investment in well-being. Reflecting on this, the leaders stressed that, as much as employees need salaries, it is not the only aspect that contributes to job satisfaction. This response highlights the broader perspective that the leaders gained regarding employee satisfaction and retention strategies. Furthermore, the implications of the training sessions extended beyond the organisational context to include the context of improving the well-being of the community.

That as much as employees need salaries, this is not the only aspect to create job satisfaction. Yes, the aspect of development and investing in human capital can benefit the centre and ensure loyalty and growth of the centre. (D1: ID4)

The leaders expressed that their purpose for work was serving, showing kindness, fostering democracy, empowering others, and practicing empathy, reflecting a holistic approach to leadership that transcends mere organisational goals:

[The implications of the training session] Improving the well-being of the community. Purpose for work: 1. Services, 2. Kindness, 3. Democracy, 4. Empower, 5. empathy. (D1: ID12)

The leaders expressed a sense of improvement in their communication skills following the third training session, particularly in interactions with parents, thus facilitating more effective conversations. Building upon this, they reflected on the importance of effectively communicating with parents regarding their children. They emphasised the significance of professionalism – for instance, ensuring that any written correspondence is crafted

thoughtfully to avoid causing offence. They also mentioned learning the value of beginning with praise for the child before addressing any concerns that may necessitate written communication. Indeed, such an approach fosters constructive dialog and maintains positive relationships between educators and parents:

We have learned how to communicate with parents concerning their children. If ever it can happen that you write a letter, it must be professional so that a parent is not hurt. Firstly, you must praise the child, then later you can go to the point that makes/forces you to write a letter. (D3: ID 4)

The leaders also stated that they aimed to improve education by fostering collaboration, and that understanding the importance of parental involvement would be one of the key aspects of their leadership approach. Elaborating on this aspect, they reflected on the pivotal role of parental engagement in enhancing children's education. They emphasised the necessity of the comprehensive involvement of parents in the learning process and advocated for a partnership between parents and teachers. Furthermore, they recognised parental engagement as a crucial educational intervention, acknowledging that while most parents, caregivers, and teachers are aware of its significance, it is often overlooked:

What I have learned is that parents must be involved in their children's education; as they require their full engagement in their learning which bringing parents and teachers together as partners. Parental engagement is one of the most crucial educational interventions. Most parents, carers, and teachers are aware of that, but they choose to ignore that. (D3: ID6)

Discussion

In high-quality action research, it is important to account for all aspects related to a study – context, quality of relationships, quality of the action research process, and outcomes (Shani 2021). Moreover, these factors need to be discussed not only in relation to each other but also explicitly in itself. Thus, in the context of this study, the contextual and practical issues of leadership need to be considered alongside theoretical reflection (Johns 2023; Male and Palaiologou 2015).

Therefore, this study employed an expansive pedagogical leadership paradigm to scrutinise the influence of leadership training on leaders of ECD centres located in rural South African areas. Employing an action research approach, we were able to include the participants in the process of outlining their developmental needs, which also made it possible to empower the leaders and facilitate their professional development (Chambers 2015; Fetterman 2015). Specifically, the circumstances of ECD in rural areas of South Africa were considered in this study. Our examination of the results of the study in the light of the theoretical framework of pedagogical leadership also opens up many areas for practical development. As indicated by our survey results, ECD leaders often have to deal with basic issues and needs, such as those related to registration and the fundamental resources constituting the necessary basis for the functioning of an ECD. In addition, the need to address knowledge gaps regarding different leadership functions and the necessity to focus on the relationship and collaboration with parents or guardians were raised as developmental needs. Consequently, the project focused not only on the aspects that are significant for leadership in general but also on those aspects that

specifically apply to the group of participants based in a rural area of South Africa (Baloyi and Makhubele 2018; Matjokana 2021, 2023; Modise 2019).

According to the learning diaries, the inputs offered during the training sessions helped the ECD leaders gain insights into different areas of leadership and improve both their theoretical and practical skills (Male and Palaiologou 2015). Considering the framework of broad-based pedagogical leadership, the realm of direct pedagogical leadership revealed an amplified comprehension of leadership, where focus was placed on the essential role of leaders as visionaries who spur teams towards unified objectives, mirroring the theoretical constructs posited by Fonsén and Lahtero (2024). The leaders also highlighted the pragmatic advantages gained through the training, noting enhancements in cultivating a constructive ethos, stimulating staff, and being advocates of the ECD sector (Fonsén 2014). These revelations emphasise the critical role played by leaders in nurturing growth and learning within their communities (Baloyi and Makhubele 2018; Keung et al. 2019; Male and Palaiologou 2017; Matjokana 2023; Modise 2019)

Furthermore, based on the framework of broad-based pedagogical leadership, indirect pedagogical leadership through technical leadership emerged as a crucial starting point in terms of improving management and leadership in the context of the project (T. J. Lahtero and Laasonen 2021). The focus was first on technical details of the management, and the training helped leaders transform the managerial capacity to leadership. As noted in the theoretical discussion, a leader must be capable of technical leadership tasks, such as budgeting and human resource management, which relate closely with the psychological aspects of leadership. In particular, leaders need to simultaneously account for educational knowledge and value pedagogical aspects in all the decisions they make (Fonsén 2013; Fonsén and Lahtero 2024; T. J. Lahtero and Salonen 2022; Male and Palaiologou 2017). In this study, the participants' learning diaries demonstrated aspects of all of these areas of leadership, highlighting the effects of the leadership training. Notably, maintaining a strong link with the basic values of pedagogical leadership can serve as a potent basis for further creating new visions and concepts for ECD centres. It can also provide new opportunities to reflect on and develop consciousness about the professional development needs of ECD centre leaders and staff (see Modise 2019). In the current study, the participants expressed grasping the fact that leadership is more than just technical management, which enabled them to view leadership as a collective task that requires the involvement of not only staff but also children, parents, and families. Overall, distributed pedagogical leadership, despite the fact that it may be understood in various ways, is an important factor that contributes to attaining a shared understanding of the educational vision and mission of ECDs (see Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016; Hickey, Flaherty, and Mannix McNamara 2022).

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that distributed pedagogical leadership positively affects the culture of a working community by inspiring and motivating staff and families, in turn promoting well-being. Therefore, leadership should be considered not only as a managerial task related to organisational and technical aspects but also as a pedagogical task that bears significant

responsibilities. This means that strengthening the knowledge and skills of ECD leaders is fundamental to establishing a robust foundation for professional growth, which subsequently leads to the formation of a resilient concept and vision for the centre, enabling successful collaboration with stakeholders and families to provide high ECD quality for children. Future research in this field should focus on identifying the actual benefits gained by the participants of this research project from the leadership training with regard to their practical work and the quality of the pedagogy of their ECD centres. It was also noted that further studies would be required to assess the sustainable impact of the training programme. Such studies may include measurable outcomes, such as improved centre operations or impact on child development.

The South African ECD community requires tailored professional development programmes for centre owners and ECD leaders that pay attention to developing practical skills in teaching, finance management, leadership, and management. Furthermore, such programmes should be created in partnership with nearby colleges and should account for the unique requirements of community-run ECD centres. Moreover, knowledge transfer and mentorship possibilities can be facilitated by fostering collaborations between seasoned retired district officials and university academics who have been responsible for ECD and junior teachers. It is evident that the role of policy-makers and their accountability for the quality of pedagogy are of significant importance. Governmental assistance and lobbying could also lead to improvements in funding for community-run centres, which would ensure both compliance and the allocation of sufficient funds for leaders and staff development and training.

To address these challenges, support systems should be strengthened through enhanced government funding and streamlined registration processes. Additionally, partnerships with NGOs and the private sector can provide alternative funding sources to improve resource allocation and ease the registration burden on these centres (Mahadew 2024; Matjokana 2023).

In order to enhance the quality of Early Childhood Development in South Africa, a training framework is needed to provide guidelines for improving learning experiences for young children. For example, the *National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four* (Department of Basic Education 2015) can serve as a resource to strengthen pedagogical knowledge for delivering a comprehensive early learning programme. Additionally, introducing a mentorship programme can support professional growth by providing continuous coaching to enhance practitioners' pedagogical skills (Pearson et al. 2024).

This study was conducted in rural area of Hammanskraal in Gauteng, South Africa. Although the study's geographical focus may restrict the findings' wider applicability to other rural or urban settings, the findings offer insightful information about leadership training in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres within this context. However, many rural locations in South Africa and other developing contexts face similar problems to those found in this study. As such, the training programme has the potential to be adapted and tested in different regions. To enhance its applicability, future adaptations of the training programme could consider:

- *Contextual Adjustments* - Tailoring the training materials to align with the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of teachers in different provinces or countries.
- *Infrastructure and Resource Variability* – Adjusting training delivery methods based on available infrastructure, such as incorporating blended learning approaches in areas with limited physical training facilities.
- *Policy and Regulatory Differences* - Aligning the training content with local and national early childhood education policies to ensure relevance and compliance.

Ethical considerations

Relevant ethical codes for scientific research were followed in all respects in this study. In particular, this research follows the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2023). Equality and non-discrimination were carefully adhered to in all phases of research. Furthermore, the principles of this research project include that participation in empirical studies is voluntary, meaning that informed consent was sought from individual participants. Participants were also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality regarding their participation in the research. They were assured that their personal information would be kept confidential, and that any collected data will be reported in a way that protects their identities. Furthermore, participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the research at any point if they no longer wished to participate. They were also assured that their decision to withdraw will not have any negative consequences or affect their relationship with the researchers or the organisation conducting the research. Any potential conflicts of interest that could potentially influence the research, analyses, or conclusions were fully disclosed. Transparency was maintained throughout the research process, and any biases or vested interests that might impact the objectivity of the findings will be acknowledged and addressed. By following these principles, the researchers aimed to uphold ethical standards and ensure the well-being and rights of the participants, as well as maintain the integrity and credibility of the research findings.

Limitations

The current study is primarily based on the context of rural South Africa. Since other countries may follow different types of practices and feature distinctive early childhood education organisations, the study results may not apply to other cultures. In addition, since the study sample includes only one rural area in South Africa, the findings cannot be generalised to other contexts. Nonetheless, this study offers important information on the developmental needs of early childhood education leaders in rural areas of South Africa and also provides evidence of the advantages of the action research approach in demonstrating real developmental requirements.

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