

Challenges in Early Childhood Care and Education in Impoverished Rural Communities in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa

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Abstract: Thirty years after the abolishment of apartheid in South Africa, socio-economic inequalities persist, resulting in a life of adversity for most young children living in poverty. This is despite the government's vision for 2030, which recognises the potential of early childhood care and education (ECCE) to alleviate poverty and inequality. Society's most vulnerable members need access to quality ECCE programmes to realise this vision. One of the main aspects of quality in ECCE is a professional workforce, a play-based curriculum, a safe environment, and parent and community partnerships. This article reports on a case study that aims to explore the experiences of ECCE personnel in impoverished and marginalised rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal Province. Data were generated from photographs, written narratives, and semi-structured interviews based on their experiences in rural ECCE centres. Despite recognising ECCE as a critical foundation for the optimal development of children, the findings reveal that numerous challenges plague the centres in these areas. The findings highlight poor infrastructure, nutrition, and service delivery, as well as the intricate interplay between ecological systems and Maslow's hierarchy of needs in shaping

the quality of ECCE for young children. To achieve the goals of the National Development Plan, the study recommends that the government prioritise investment in ECCE programmes and support and collaborate with non-governmental organisations, especially in marginalised areas of KwaZulu-Natal.

Keywords: Early childhood care, rural communities, hierarchy of needs, ecological systems theory, early childhood education.

1. Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is widely recognised as a critical intervention in addressing poverty and inequality, providing children with the foundation for lifelong learning and development (Knafo et al., 2019). In South Africa, where disparities in access to quality education persist, ECCE has been identified as a key element in the National Development Plan 2030, aimed at reducing inequality and promoting social cohesion (Atmore, 2019). However, despite significant policy reforms in the post-apartheid era, systemic challenges remain, particularly in rural regions of KwaZulu-Natal, one of the three provinces most affected by poverty (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2022). Historical inequalities and the ongoing marginalisation of rural communities exacerbate these challenges.

Existing literature highlights the potential of ECCE to serve as a transformative force in South Africa's efforts to bridge the socio-economic divide (Atmore, 2018). Nevertheless, a significant gap persists in understanding the specific experiences of early childhood personnel working in rural contexts. Rural ECCE personnel encounter challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited professional development opportunities, and insufficient resources, which adversely affect their ability to deliver quality education and care. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure that rural children benefit from the same educational opportunities as their urban counterparts.

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This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of ECCE personnel in rural KwaZulu-Natal, providing critical insights into the challenges they face in delivering quality education. Guided by Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that shape the work of rural ECCE personnel. A qualitative research methodology was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with ECCE personnel to gather data on their experiences and the systemic issues they confront. By illuminating these challenges, the study seeks to inform policy interventions that can enhance rural ECCE offerings and promote greater equity in early childhood education across South Africa.

1.1 Research Question

This study aimed to identify the challenges hindering the quality of ECCE programmes in rural communities. This study sought to answer the following research question:

- What are the experiences of ECCE teachers and community workers in ECCE in impoverished contexts?

1.2 Early childhood care and education in South Africa

ECCE encompasses informal educational settings, whether at home or in centres, that occur before the reception year (Grade R) (DBE, 2015). This is part of early childhood development, generally covering the period from birth to nine years of age (Kuhne & Fakie, 2019). With the shift of responsibilities from the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Basic Education (DBE) now manages services for children from birth to age five. Globally, this developmental stage is recognised as critically important, and the South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF) highlights its role in establishing a strong foundation for future learning and development (DBE, 2015). The sector employs a transdisciplinary approach, acknowledging that young children require both education and care (Moodly, 2019), which supports a more holistic development that includes cognitive, social, physical, emotional, and language growth.

Historically, apartheid laws and policies created a harsh environment for most South Africans, where living standards were largely dictated by race for many centuries. Apartheid laws, such as the Bantu Education Act of 1953, institutionalised racial segregation in education, providing inferior resources and opportunities to non-white South Africans (Quan et al., 2024). The authors note that this act was specifically designed to limit the educational and economic prospects of Black South Africans, ensuring that they received substandard education, with the curriculum focusing on manual labour rather than intellectual or professional development. Consequently, the basic human rights of the majority of Black South Africans were regularly violated, particularly affecting the most vulnerable members of society. Atmore (2013) observed that young children in these settings experienced extreme deprivation, including chronic hunger and malnutrition, insecurity, trauma, family breakdowns, community disintegration, lack of access to primary health care and education, and inadequate living conditions such as poor housing, insufficient electricity, and lack of running water and sanitation. The legacy of racial discrimination in South Africa also significantly impacted early childhood education, which was predominantly segregated by race. These entrenched, deep-rooted inequalities persist today, particularly in rural and impoverished areas of KwaZulu-Natal, where ECCE services still face numerous challenges. According to Phatudi (2007), the period from 1950 to 1970 was marked by a severe lack of early education opportunities for non-white individuals.

Concerned citizens responded to the shortage of early childhood education facilities. After the 1970s, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began establishing early childhood development centres that were not supported by government funding (Moodly, 2019). Advocacy groups worked to establish informal, community-run preschools in townships and rural areas. These initiatives

aimed to provide early learning opportunities and support services to marginalised communities during the apartheid era. Positive changes began to emerge in 1994, starting with the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on 16 June 1995 by the new democratic South African government (Atmore, 2018). This was the first international treaty endorsed by the South African government that affirmed all children's rights. Initial improvements included the provision of free medical care and health monitoring for pregnant women and children under six (Atmore, 2018). Following this, White Paper Five (DoE, 2001) was published, outlining strategies to enhance early childhood provision. The subsequent development of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Plan (NIECDP) (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2015) identified early childhood development as a key tool for reducing poverty in marginalised communities. The NIECDP also aimed to support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG 4), which addresses inequalities stemming from poor early childhood experiences. It suggests that investing in early childhood development can tackle the root causes of social and economic inequalities (Rudolph et al., 2019).

Despite recognising ECCE as a means of social and economic transformation, centres in marginalised areas still face numerous challenges that negatively impact the sector. These challenges include strict registration policies set by the government, unqualified staff, limited opportunities for play-based learning, and inadequate parental involvement. Many rural centres struggle to obtain state funding due to stringent government criteria. According to Vorster (2019) and Ilifa Bantwana (2017), government regulations for registration often disadvantage the poor, requiring documents such as property title deeds, lease agreements, or Permission to Occupy certificates. As a result, centres in informal settlements or on land not designated for habitation are unable to meet these requirements, further affecting those who have historically faced discrimination and marginalisation. Additionally, Vorster's media report and other sources indicate that government officials frequently fail to provide necessary support and often close ECCE centres without adequate notice. Without proper registration, these centres cannot access government subsidies and stipends necessary for their operation. This highlights the double burden faced by marginalised communities, who are not only struggling to meet regulatory requirements due to their precarious circumstances but are also often penalised rather than supported. The government's failure to provide necessary backing and the closure of ECCE centres reveal a systemic problem of disengagement and inadequate governance. This lack of coordination intensifies historical inequalities, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation. The focus should shift towards collaboration and support instead of punitive actions.

Another overwhelming challenge facing ECCE is the unqualified or underqualified workforce (Harrison, 2020). Strong evidence associates teacher pre-service qualifications and continuing professional development as essential contributors to quality in ECCE (Biersteker et al., 2016; Slot, 2018; OECD, 2018). Moreover, research has shown that higher education levels are linked to higher quality of care and better outcomes for children (Burchinal et al., 2002). Despite this, the early childhood development (ECD) census reveals that only 52% of practitioners hold relevant qualifications in ECCE (DBE, 2022). Coupled with the issue of qualifications is the misconception that early childhood teachers are merely caregivers rather than professionals in education (Schachter et al., 2021). This belief undermines early childhood teachers as skilled professionals who are essential for facilitating critical developmental milestones through structured and intentional learning experiences (Akaba et al., 2022). In rural areas, this misconception can potentially hinder the availability of support and resources for teachers to provide high-quality, developmentally appropriate education.

The findings from the ECD census (DBE, 2022) highlight limited time for play and resource constraints in ECCE centres across South Africa. These limitations are even more pronounced in rural areas, where poverty is often more prevalent. The disparities between wealthier, high-resourced centres and those in lower-income areas, including rural settings, exacerbate inequality in early

childhood education. In rural areas, many ECCE centres struggle with inadequate infrastructure, a lack of trained teachers, and limited access to play materials (DBE, 2022). These factors hinder teachers' ability to implement a play-based approach, as outlined in the Department of Higher Education and Training's (2017) qualification framework for ECCE teachers. While play is widely recognised as an optimal method for learning and development, the lack of resources in rural areas means that children in these settings are missing out on critical developmental opportunities (Selepe et al., 2023). Another concern highlighted by the ECD census is that the gap in time allocated for free play between wealthier and lower-income centres widens the equity divide (DBE, 2022). In rural areas, the absence of resources such as safe outdoor play areas, educational toys, and learning materials constrains the ability to integrate play into daily programmes. As a result, children in these areas may not receive the same quality of education and developmental support as their peers in better-resourced centres, contributing to ongoing educational disparities.

Rural parental involvement in early childhood care and education centres remains an issue (Radebe, 2022), despite recognising parents and caregivers as important facilitators of children's learning and emphasising partnerships between practitioners and parents in the NCF (DBE, 2015). In rural communities, the lack of parental involvement could stem from absent parents, orphaned children being cared for by grandmothers (Damian et al., 2019), older siblings taking on the role of parent (Thwala, 2019), absent fathers (Mavungu et al., 2014), or child-headed homes (Hall, 2019). Ebrahim and Waniganayake (2019) also outline poverty, HIV/AIDS, migrant labour practices, and the complexities of multi-generational caregiving in rural areas as possible factors that could hinder parents' capabilities to be involved in their children's education.

Therefore, a study in rural ECCE is essential to uncover the unique challenges and barriers faced by these communities. Understanding these issues in depth can drive targeted interventions and policies, ensuring that children in rural areas receive the quality education and care crucial for their holistic development and future success.

1.3 Theoretical perspectives

In ECCE centres in rural areas, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory together provide a comprehensive and complementary theoretical understanding of the research participants' experiences. Maslow focuses on individual physiological and psychological requirements essential for children's growth and development. Simultaneously, Bronfenbrenner highlights the various layers of environmental systems that interact to influence a child's development within a broader social and contextual framework.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, children's individual development depends on fulfilling basic deficiency needs – such as adequate food, safety, shelter, and stable relationships – before they can progress towards higher growth needs like cognitive and aesthetic development, which are essential for self-actualisation (Castle & Buckler, 2021). Play is critical for cognitive development, a key growth need, according to Yurdakul and Arar (2023). However, in rural ECCE settings, as reflected in the ECD census (DBE, 2022), centres often lack the resources to facilitate structured and free play. This is not merely a shortfall in teaching strategies but a symptom of deeper systemic inequities. In impoverished rural areas, the persistent lack of resources and unmet basic needs further compounds children's challenges in reaching their full developmental potential. Without fulfilling children's basic needs and providing adequate play opportunities, these children remain stuck in the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy, preventing them from achieving self-actualisation and their full potential.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory complements this by illustrating the broader environmental factors that influence child development in rural settings (Moodly, 2019). For example, the home and ECCE centre are the immediate spheres of influence at the microsystem level.

However, in many rural KZN centres, the quality of care is compromised due to a lack of resources, including materials for play-based learning. The mesosystem, which involves the interaction between the home and school, often suffers from poor communication and engagement, further limiting support for the child's development. At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, inadequate government support, restrictive policies, and broader societal issues like poverty and unemployment play a significant role in shaping the quality of ECCE services. Rural centres often receive less funding, fewer resources, and insufficient teacher training, all of which directly impact the quality of care children receive. The DBE census (2022) also noted that wealthier centres are better equipped, thus widening the gap between rural and urban settings, or 'the haves and the have-nots.' Finally, the chronosystem—the impact of time and changing conditions—further demonstrates the long-term impact of inadequate ECCE services in rural KZN. Children who begin their education in under-resourced centres are more likely to face lifelong disadvantages, as their developmental needs remain unmet during critical early years. This comprehensive view of child development highlights the persistent challenges rural ECCE centres face, particularly in impoverished areas of KwaZulu-Natal, where systemic inequities, insufficient resources, and limited government support continue to hinder the delivery of quality education and care.

In summary, Maslow's emphasis on meeting basic and growth needs and Bronfenbrenner's understanding of how interrelated environmental factors shape development underscore the significant challenges rural ECCE centres face in delivering quality education. The absence of stable resources and support systems in these environments limits children's immediate learning and curtails their long-term potential to thrive.

2. Materials and Methods

The study adopts an interpretive research paradigm, where social phenomena are understood through the subjective interpretations of individuals. Researchers who adhere to this worldview regard reality as socially constructed and generate knowledge by interacting with participants to understand their intended meanings. Aligned with interpretivism, this qualitative research approach aims to explore the rich experiences of ECCE personnel in rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. In qualitative research, researchers attempt to make sense of the experiences of research participants within their specific contexts (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Thus, this research approach allows participants to share their lived experiences, amplifying their voices and agency (van Schie, 2022).

The study employed a case study research design aimed at achieving an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in a real-life context (Coombs, 2022). Case studies thus offer multi-faceted insights into complex issues within a natural setting (Cohen et al., 2018). For this study, the case comprised a group of eight participants with experience in rural ECCE settings, forming a bounded system (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Here, the case is represented by the experiences of the eight ECCE personnel working in rural, marginalised areas of KwaZulu-Natal. The case study approach was selected because it allows the participants to explain "how" and "why" they navigate their contextual challenges, making it an ideal method for capturing the complexities of their lived experiences in these under-resourced environments.

2.1 The Selection of participants

The process of selecting cases for this study involved a purposeful sampling approach, focusing on individuals who were knowledgeable, suitably experienced, and had direct experience working in ECCE centres within the specified marginalised rural communities. The NGO Director, community workers, teacher trainers, and teachers primarily have experience in KwaZulu-Natal, in areas with high unemployment rates and impoverished communities. These research participants offered different perspectives through which the challenges were viewed, thus enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how education and care are delivered. Teachers and teacher

trainers concentrated on issues related to curriculum and pedagogy, while community workers highlighted the broader social and environmental factors that influence ECCE in rural contexts. The two NGOs aim to improve early childhood development by providing quality training to ECCE teachers in marginalised areas. Additionally, NGO 2 provided play resources and monitored care aspects such as health, safety, and nutrition at the ECCE centres.

Table 1: Research Participants

S/N	Research Participant	Roles in organisation	Years of experience in ECCE	Age Group	Place of Work
1	NGO Director	ECCE Training Organisation	45 years of experience in ECCE training	60-70 years	NGO 1
2	Community Worker 1	Training and monitoring of ECCE teachers	11 years	30-35	NGO 2
3	Community Worker 2	Training and monitoring of ECCE teachers	12 YEARS	30 - 35	NGO 2
4	Community Worker 3	Training and monitoring of ECCE teachers	12 years	40 - 45	NGO 2
5	Teacher Trainer 1	Training and monitoring of ECCE teachers	5 years	20-30 years	NGO 1
6	Teacher Trainer 2	Training and monitoring of ECCE teachers	8 years	20-30 years	NGO 1
7	ECCE Teacher 1	Teaching children from birth to four	4 years	20-25	ECCE Teacher Presently unemployed
8	ECCE Teacher 2	Teaching children from birth to four	8 years	25 -30	ECCE Teacher

2.2 Data collection

In case study research design, more than one data collection method is generally used to better understand the case being studied (van Schie, 2023). This approach also enhances the study's trustworthiness by enabling the triangulation of data sources (Cohen et al., 2018). This study generated data using written narratives, semi-structured interviews, and photovoice. Firstly, participants provided written reflections based on the prompt question: What are your experiences in rural ECCE settings? These written reflections were accompanied by photographs taken during their experiences. However, the reflections were brief and presented in point form, which did not convey the true essence of their experiences. Therefore, I arranged for both face-to-face and Zoom interviews to probe deeper and gain a nuanced understanding of their experiences and interpretations of their photographs. According to Hubel et al. (2023), photovoice is participant-led photography and dialogue that enables participants to highlight community issues through photography. The authors note that this method was originally developed to empower the voices of marginalised groups in order to improve their lives. In this study, the images were supplemented by

a discussion following the 'SHOWED' method used by Luthuli (2019). The five questions guided the interviews are:

- What do you see here?
- What is really happening here?
- How does this relate to Our lives?
- Why does this problem or strength exist?
- How could this image Educate the community or policymakers?
- What can we Do about it?

2.3 Data analysis and ethical consideration

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and read several times while examining patterns. Subsequently, colours were used to code similar ideas into sub-themes, which formed the major themes for the study. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this process as inductive analysis, where the interpretation of data is conducted without relying on the researcher's preconceptions of themes and subthemes. Ethical principles are crucial in all research, and it was my obligation and responsibility to ensure that my research would not cause any harm. I adhered to the ethical considerations set out by the university and received ethical clearance as part of a community engagement project with the University of KwaZulu-Natal ethical number HSSREC/00006778/2024. Gatekeeper consent was also obtained from the non-governmental organisations, and research participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

3. Presentation of Results

The main purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of participants working in rural and other disadvantaged areas in KZN. ECCE remains the most marginalised sector in education, and the situation is even bleaker in impoverished communities. The following narratives from the research participants reflect the extent of disadvantage experienced by the ECCE sector in rural areas. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the findings, resulting in the presentation of two themes related to participant experiences: (i) The individual child: Deficiency and growth needs in the microsystem, and (ii) Connections between home and school and broader systemic issues.

3.1 The individual child: Deficiency and growth needs in the microsystem

Narratives from the research participants indicated that both the deficiency and growth needs of children were not being met in the microsystem of the ECCE centre, which encompasses the child's immediate and direct environment. According to Bronfenbrenner, if the relationships and environment in ECCE are enabling and nurturing (Rethman, 2023), children's growth and development may be promoted. For example, Community Worker 1 described the denial of basic physiological needs for children, such as inadequate shelter, poor sanitation, and unreliable access to water. The lack of proper facilities, such as age-appropriate toilets and a consistent water supply, also undermined safety, putting children at risk due to inadequate infrastructure.

Some centres are in a metal container, and when it rains, they have leaks. Most of the time there is no water in taps in this area. And toilets need to be age-appropriate, toilets and sinks that are convenient for children to reach. Here, we have tanks for water. Some very poor areas have no toilets and use the bucket system (Community Worker 1).

Similarly, the narrative from Community Worker 2 reveals critical shortcomings in physiological and safety needs, as inadequate infrastructure—such as a lack of proper toilets and poor building conditions—compromises the health and security of children. Furthermore, the overwhelming children-to-teacher ratio exacerbates these issues, as insufficient staffing makes it challenging to ensure proper care and supervision of the children. According to Maslow, the development of

relationships between teachers and children fulfils the needs of love and belonging (Yurdakul & Arar, 2023), which are not being met at the centres. The NGO assisted the centres by providing resources and training; however, they could not help with maintaining the buildings, installing proper toilets, or paying teachers' salaries to reduce the children-to-teacher ratio. This denies children a safe and functional learning environment.

The NGOs assist with teacher training, but the infrastructure issues are expensive, and it is difficult to assist the centres with this. Our government needs to get involved as there are centres in my area that don't have proper toilets and they don't have a good structure either. There is one with 86 children in one room, and there's only one practitioner. Yeah, the other one is just a cook outside who is not coming inside (Community Worker 2).

Also, regarding safety, the teachers mentioned the lack of official patrols and the need for teachers to increase vigilance to ensure children's safety.

I am not sure that the area or the premises are safe enough for the children. We don't have security where they pay for patrol around the area. To be honest, we just have to be observant of the children's safety, and we have to go the extra mile to ensure that each and every child is safe. So safety is an issue (ECCE Teacher 1).

Similarly, ECCE Teacher 2 also noted her concerns about the safety of the children due to crime and the danger of walking long distances.

Houses in rural areas are far apart, so it is hard for children to walk long distances, and crime there is at a high level (ECCE Teacher 2).

In addition, Community Worker 1 noted that the food provided was very basic, consisting of affordable items such as rice, chicken, and porridge. The scarcity of more nutritious options, such as tinned fish, eggs, and fruit, due to high costs does not meet the children's nutritional needs.

I can't really say that the food they eat is great. Every child should eat fruit daily but these children do not get any. They mainly provide rice and chicken for meals. Rice is always included because it's affordable, and chicken remains reasonably priced, but they are shredded into little pieces, so everyone gets some. Tinned fish and eggs have become very expensive; they also serve porridge daily due to increased prices (Community Worker 1).

Structural concerns emerged as a significant issue again when ECCE Teacher 1 mentioned the lack of regular maintenance of the buildings, which risks children's safety due to potential structural failure. Unattractive buildings made of makeshift materials can also negatively impact a child's aesthetic and cognitive needs by depriving them of a stimulating and harmonious environment that fosters beauty and order. For example, the photograph of the building in Figure 1, provided by Community Worker 2, supports the ECCE teacher's concerns. According to Maslow, aesthetically pleasing and well-designed spaces equipped with charts and resources contribute to a child's cognitive development by creating a stimulating and engaging learning environment that encourages exploration and creativity (Castle & Buckler, 2021). Additionally, both aesthetic and cognitive growth needs were not met at the centres.



Figure 1: Broken buildings

“This is a classroom with 45 kids” (Community Worker 2).

Some of the buildings are not regularly maintained. This is a worry for the safety of the children if something breaks and falls on them in the older buildings (ECCE Teacher 1).

Charts do not even stick to the walls of these buildings (Community Worker 1).

The centre is a container, and the stairs are rusted (ECCE Teacher 2).

Researchers and theorists have identified play as an optimal way to grow, develop, and self-actualise in the early years. According to Maslow, fulfilling cognitive needs involves engaging in activities that promote exploration and intellectual growth, which play-based methods are designed to support (Yurdakul & Arar, 2023). This highlights the importance of knowledgeable teachers who are trained to facilitate play-based learning. However, Community Worker 1 noted

The situation with play is poor because you cannot expect a practitioner to be able to teach a lesson using play while she's not trained. That is the problem as it requires at least some knowledge of play-based teaching. The NGO provides toys and resources to some of the centres, but we need to teach them how to use them properly. The resources that are provided are theme-related toys for children aged three to five years to play with and learn about. The major challenge for us is that we train the practitioners, but three months down the line, she is no longer there. The site manager swops her around to teach another age group, or the teacher moves on to some other job that pays better (Community Worker 1).

Teacher Trainer 1 similarly noted the need for play resources and greater skills in technology.

Most of the time, you find that there are not enough resources for children to play and learn with. Teachers are not skilled enough to use technology where they can find many resources to teach children without using money, like downloading NCF books online and being aware of which method of teaching they must use (Teacher Trainer 1).

Effective play-based learning relies on both indoor and outdoor learning experiences in the centre, and inadequate outdoor play equipment limits the holistic development of children. The teacher reflected on the need for outdoor play areas for the holistic development of children.

Because the NGO is providing us with the resources and training, we are able to teach using play. The toys donated are mainly used inside the classroom in the different learning corners. The problem is with outdoor play areas. Primary schools and parks with jungle gyms are far away. Sometimes outdoor play equipment like jungle gyms, sandpits and slides are sponsored. These are often in poor condition and unsuitable for the children (ECCE teacher 1).

The Director of the NGO summed up the key issues relating to ECCE in the rural areas they worked at as:

Poverty of the masses prior to the dismantling of apartheid is still stark today, and the impact is clearly felt in the ECD constituency. Infrastructure, limited space, not being registered, lack of sanitation facilities, lack of teaching materials remain a challenge. Poverty impacts fees received and stipends paid to teaching staff. With the meagre resources, all needs have to be met. Nutrition is so important – here too, is a challenge. However, care is definitely evident – you can feel and see it. Love and affection are observable (Director of NGO).

From the above narratives, both Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provide complementary insights into children's development, particularly within the microsystem—the immediate environment directly influencing the child. The inequalities of apartheid still pervade these centres today, resulting in the children's basic needs not being met adequately. Maslow's theory emphasises that deficiency needs—such as physiological needs (e.g., adequate shelter, sanitation, poor nutrition, and water) and safety needs—must be fulfilled before

children can achieve growth needs like esteem and self-actualisation (Yurdakul & Arar, 2023). In the context of these ECCE centres, inadequate facilities—such as leaking buildings, insufficient sanitation, and overcrowded classrooms—fail to meet these essential needs, thereby hindering children’s physical health, safety, and emotional security. This aligns with findings in the ECD census (DBE, 2022), which claim that centres catering to predominantly Black African learners often face greater challenges with infrastructure deficits (such as lack of electricity, water, and sanitation) and lower levels of support compared to sites serving other demographic groups. Despite this, the teachers’ care was palpable and visibly evident, fulfilling the love and belonging needs as described in Maslow’s hierarchy. However, broken buildings and falling charts hinder Maslow’s growth needs—children’s aesthetic and cognitive needs and their ability to engage in stimulating learning environments (Yurdakul & Arar, 2023). Cognitive needs are further compromised by untrained teachers and high staff turnover (Castle & Buckler, 2021). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory further contextualises these issues by examining the microsystem, which includes the child’s immediate environment in the ECCE centre. The theory illustrates that poor infrastructure within this microsystem affects not only children’s physical and emotional needs but also cognitive and aesthetic areas. Inadequate facilities and lack of maintenance create an environment that undermines children’s sense of safety and well-being, limiting their ability to engage fully in learning and exploration. The theory also highlights how failures at the microsystem level impact connections between home and school and broader systemic issues—which is addressed in the theme below.

3.2 Connections between home and centres and broader systemic issues

Narratives from participants reveal that connections between home and school, as well as broader systemic issues, impact the quality of rural ECCE offerings. The mesosystem encompasses interactions between microsystems (Moodly, 2019), such as the effect of poor communication between home and school on a child’s learning experience. Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of parental involvement in a child’s development (Bipath, 2022; Kwatubana & Makhalemele, 2015; Nevski & Siibak, 2016). Community Worker 1 emphasised the need to foster stronger relationships between the home and the centre.

Some of the parents are unemployed and sitting at home. They could come in and assist in some way, but most do not. The site managers will say okay, I know that you cannot afford to pay school fees. You can volunteer to assist me with cleaning or feeding the children. But parents are failing them. Some do not appreciate that they no longer charge the full amount of school fees that are expected for each child. Many parents fail to do those little favours even when they have the time available, even though it is within walking distance of their homes (Community Worker 1).

The exosystem includes indirect influences, such as government policies and community resources, where inadequate support and restrictive regulations affect the quality of ECCE centres. Community Worker 2 highlighted the lack of government funding due to their not being registered with the responsible government departments. Most centres found it difficult to get registered, as the criteria set out in the policies were often beyond their financial means. For example, many of the centres were home-based and required separate kitchens and separate entrances for the centres, which they could not afford to arrange in their present homes. The government departments were also often chaotic and unable to provide constructive feedback on how their registration applications could be processed. Unfortunately, no registration meant no government subsidies for the children’s meals and teachers’ salaries.

I think the government needs to do something. You know the government is failing us a lot that’s all I can say. I don’t think they care what happens in the centres. First of all they’re not subsidised or funded and people expect quality. We are the feeder of the primary schools the majority of the time. And also, they cannot afford to be registered because they don’t fulfil all

the criteria to be registered with the Department. Some do - but the application is always in progress. The application is in progress because there's nobody there to say you have an issue on this, let's try and help you out on how to fix the issue.For a centre that is home-based, it is difficult to have a separate kitchen or a separate entrance gate. This costs money because you cannot have a centre and still have your own house. People are coming inside the house with the same entrance that is being used for children to come inside. But the government haven't given them money, so how will they do that? You can't separate the centre and the house with no funding. There is not enough funds to do that (Community Worker 2).

Community Worker 1's narrative further emphasises the indirect factors that influence the quality of ECCE offerings in the exosystem. She explains that the lack of support from government departments affects the resources and stability at the centres, resulting in low staff salaries and poor quality of training provided.

The concern is that the practitioners, um, I cannot say they are practitioners, but the people that they employ at the centres are not qualified. That's our major issue and the staff turnover is uncontrollable. You find there's a new practitioner every six months down the line. The one you trained is no longer there, and you have a new practitioner, so it is very, very difficult to keep them on track to ensure that we are able to train them to the best of our ability. There is no support from the Departments of Social Development or the Department of Education. They don't get anything, and that is why they leave that they are leaving after a few months. It is because of the money that they are getting paid. Some earn R600 per month depending on the fees that the centre charges. The majority of the children in these centres' parents are unemployed, so they go to the centres for free, and they are not charged anything (Community Worker 1).

The macrosystem represents the larger societal and cultural context, including pervasive issues like poverty and unemployment, which shape the conditions and resources available to children (Knafo, 2019). From Theme 1, the direct impact of poverty is evident in participants' reflections on poor nutrition, parental unemployment, high teacher turnover, low teacher salaries, and inadequate infrastructure in the microsystem. However, societal perceptions and beliefs about Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) also impacted the quality of education in these rural centres. According to the narratives of Community Worker 2 and the Teacher Trainers, the historical perception of ECCE as merely a play school undermines the recognition of ECCE as a critical period for a child's development across all domains. The community perceives ECCE as a place for basic caregiving rather than as an integrated, carefully planned educational programme that facilitates the holistic, well-rounded development of children while balancing nurturing care.

People don't know how important ECD is. They just think it's a creche. Most importantly, in rural areas, even the community does not want to get involved because way back when we were growing up, we used to call it a creche. You just go there to sing and sleep. There was no program as such that needed to be implemented. I've noticed most people don't take it seriously, especially in the rural areas (Community Worker 2).

Teachers still believe that it is a daycare so they are just taking care of the children some don't even have a daily planner. You will find a 2-year-old child and a 4-year-old child in one class because they are using their backyard room, and there is only 1 room. Even qualified teachers find it hard to teach in a mixed class, and the teacher ends up not teaching (Teacher Trainer 2).

Some parents value ECD as a safe place to keep their children, not knowing the main educational impact it has (Teacher Trainer 1).

The tensions surrounding beliefs about ECCE teachers and their roles are further compounded when centres expect teachers to engage in multiple tasks related to care, such as cleaning and cooking. This expectation perpetuates the misconception that teachers primarily serve as carers. Multitasking diverts teachers' attention from their primary responsibility of facilitating an early education programme. Community Worker 1's reflection reinforces this:

It's the teachers that do the cleaning and the cooking. Sometimes a supervisor has a group that she has to see. So they are multitasking where they are not just teachers they're also cleaners and cooks and assistants. Anybody can open a day care centre and have about 20 kids. So that person will cook and clean for about 20 kids and do all the necessary things that need to be done in early childhood because finances are limited (Community Worker 1).

Besides multitasking, the Community Worker 2 workers also noted that the roles of teachers as educational professionals were undermined because proper support systems were not in place for cleaning the toilets at the centres.

Some use the bucket system and teachers are responsible for cleaning these out as per a roster (Community Worker 2).

Community Worker 2 also noted the importance of play-based learning, as shown in Figure 2, for young children. It requires teachers to understand the requirements of the National Curriculum Framework (DBE, 2015) and the need to integrate different concepts into purposefully planned play-based experiences.



Figure 2: Play time

Children roll out little snakes. During play they are rolling the play dough and singing with their friends. At the same time, they exercise their finger muscles and learn about colours and early math concepts such as thick and thin and long and short (Community Worker 2).

Finally, the chronosystem considers transitions that occur over time (Moodly, 2019), such as shifts in educational policies or economic conditions that affect long-term development. The current migration of early childhood development from the DSD to the DBE is an example of a transition that will have a long-term impact on the sector. The ECCE teacher confirmed that the shift in function is a positive change they are looking forward to for the betterment of the sector.

I think this will encourage people to think seriously about ECCE as part of the education sector. We will no longer be regarded as nannies or caregivers but as proper teachers (ECCE Teacher 1).

In this theme, narratives from participants reveal that both systemic and temporal factors significantly impact early childhood care and education (ECCE). The mesosystem is evident in the poor communication and strained relationships between home and the centre, which can affect a

child's learning experience. Community field workers highlighted challenges such as the lack of parental involvement and support when parents fail to volunteer despite being asked. This aligns with a study by Radebe (2022), which states that rural parental involvement in early childhood development remains an issue. The exosystem includes indirect influences such as government policies and community resources, with inadequate support and stringent registration criteria affecting the quality of ECCE centres, as identified by Vorster (2019) earlier in the article. Data from the participants also revealed that government policies make it difficult to become registered and access government subsidies. Poor infrastructure and low staff wages, coupled with high turnover rates and unqualified staff, reflect these broader systemic issues. The microsystem encompasses societal and cultural contexts, including pervasive poverty and outdated perceptions of ECCE as mere childcare rather than a sensitive period for all learning. Finally, the chronosystem involves transitions over time, such as the shift in responsibility from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education, which is anticipated to bring positive changes and better recognition for ECCE as an integral part of the education sector.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study sought to explore the experiences of ECCE personnel working in impoverished and marginalised rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal, where people live in makeshift homes and experience poor service delivery and economic hardships. Despite recognising ECCE as a critical foundation for the optimal development of children, the findings reveal that many challenges, including poor infrastructure, nutrition, and service delivery, plague the centres in these areas. The findings also highlight significant deficiencies within the microsystem, deficits in partnerships between the home and the centre in the mesosystem, and stringent government policies that impact the registration of centres in the exosystem. These issues are further intensified by societal and cultural beliefs that evidence outdated perceptions undermining the educational value of ECCE. Finally, the function shift reflects the chronosystem's potential to foster positive change in the sector. I concur with Atmore (2019) that a lack of government interest in the ECCE sector is a crisis in the making.

To improve ECCE, addressing the infrastructural and systemic challenges identified in this paper is crucial. Improving facilities and meeting basic safety and health standards are essential for fulfilling children's physiological and safety needs. Strengthening support systems, including better government funding and streamlined registration processes, can alleviate some of the pressures on centres and improve resource allocation. Professional development and retention strategies for teachers should be prioritised to ensure consistent quality teaching and support for play-based learning. Additionally, fostering stronger home-school connections and community involvement can enhance the overall support system for children. Finally, the recent policy shift to the Department of Basic Education offers an opportunity to advocate for a more integrated and robust approach to ECCE, recognising it as a critical component of the educational system and not merely as childcare. By addressing these areas, stakeholders can work towards creating a more supportive and enriching environment that meets the diverse needs of children and promotes their holistic development. The contributions of NGOs in ECCE in rural areas are vital and cannot be overlooked. In places where government efforts fall short, these organisations are dedicated to supporting society's youngest and most vulnerable members.

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