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Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training

Practitioners' perceptions and understanding of the approaches underpinning curriculum and pedagogy in an early childhood classroom

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Executive summary

1. Background to the study

The gazetting of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (0–4 years) in December 2015 gave rise to questions about intended learning outcomes, the child's profile, the development of executive functioning and approaches that could most effectively guide the implementation of the framework. In the first phase of the investigation into early learning, Umalusi conducted research on intended exit-level outcomes of early childhood development (ECD) provision in South Africa. The NCF (0–4 years) was analysed and, among others, the exit-level outcomes determined. The findings from this investigation fed into a much bigger study into phase transitions and intended learning outcomes in nine fields from ECD to Grade 12.

The second phase of the project aimed to provide answers to teaching and learning approaches that could best assist in the implementation of the NCF. This part of the investigation involved a multiple case study, investigating four approaches in the ECD sector. This included centres founded on three prominent philosophies in early childhood education – Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia – as well as mainstream centres registered and subsidised by the Department of Social Development (DSD).

The question under study was how practitioners perceive and understand the approaches underpinning curriculum and pedagogy in an early childhood classroom, and the contextual factors that impact on teaching and learning.

Research design and methodology

The study used a multi-case design and qualitative approach to understand the perceptions, experiences and influence of the environment on the early learning practice of practitioners and managers of ECD centres that implement different approaches.

Sample

Purposive sampling was used to select ECD centres based on philosophy, curriculum and location, i.e. rural (Limpopo and Eastern Cape) as opposed to urban (Gauteng and Western Cape). These included four of each of the Montessori and Waldorf ECD centres subsidised by DSD, which are referred to as mainstream centres, and three Reggio Emilia centres. A centre using the Reggio Emilia approach could not be located in Limpopo and was replaced by one using an alternative approach.

Table I: Number of respondents by job role and curriculum approach

Sample		ECD approach						
		Waldorf	Reggio Emilia	Mainstream	Montessori	Alternative	Total	
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Number
Job role within the school	Practitioner	5	7	7	7	3	29	29
	Management	4	3	5	4	1	17	17

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners and principals of the ECD centres using different interview schedules for practitioners and principals. Standardised classroom observation was undertaken to assess the implementation of the curriculum, learner behaviour and the responsiveness of practitioners. Researchers were stationed in classes for children of different age groups, aiming – as far as possible – to observe learners aged 0–3, 3–4 and 5–6 years.

Analysis

Qualitative and quantitative content analysis was used. Themes and sub-themes were identified from the interview transcripts and in relation to broader ECD thinking, NCF goals and practices. These were independently reviewed by two other team members and finalised. These were coded in Microsoft Excel and imported into SPSS for comparative quantitative analysis. Themes and sub-themes were identified for analysis.

2. Findings and implications for ECD training and quality assurance

Staff experience, qualifications and professional development

The practitioners in the sampled pre-schools had between five and 10 years' experience and managers/principals had 14 to 24 years' experience. All managers had some educational qualification, although many of their qualifications were teachers' qualifications other than ECD qualifications. Mainstream managers all had the entry-level National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 4 Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) in ECD. Practitioners most often had an ECD NQF Level 4 with some having qualifications at NQF Level 5 or another schooling qualification. Approximately 10% of the practitioners at the Montessori and Reggio Emilia centres, and those pre-schools using the alternative approach, did not have an ECD qualification.

A striking feature of all approaches was the reported level of internal and external support for ongoing professional development and practice. Conferences and external mentoring through their respective associations was evident for the Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia centres. The alternative approach relied on internet-based resources, and mainstream pre-schools were supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and ECD forums linked to the DSD, although often with a focus on safety and compliance. Provincial education department support was limited.

Internal professional support included joint planning, and senior staff observing and mentoring the teaching, but this was less in the mainstream pre-schools. This may be because of the lower level of qualifications of the managers in these pre-schools. Internal mentoring and support is particularly high at the Waldorf centres and may explain the consistency of reported understanding and practice across the Waldorf pre-schools.

Practitioner understanding of the approach that informs their practice

Key findings regarding the understanding of the underlying approach that informed their practice include the following:

- Familiarity with the NCF and National Early Learning and Development Standards (NELDS), which are intended to underpin any curriculum in South Africa, was limited across all the sampled curricula and there had been little training in this regard. Operationalising the NCF is also not easy.
- Few respondents articulated a clear policy regarding Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) and English instruction was most common, often due to mixed language enrolments. Practitioners used the vernacular or gestures to support communication where this was possible, but in an ad-hoc manner.
- Mainstream respondents were less able to articulate the philosophy underlying their approach than respondents using the other approaches. They resorted to the use of pre-prepared curricula from other providers rather than adapting the NCF to meet the needs of the learners in their contexts. This may suggest that training does not sufficiently focus on underpinning ECD theory and assist them to develop a position. In addition, while all mainstream practitioners had a basic ECD qualification, their access to continuing professional support was more limited than that available to the respondents from the other curricula.
- All approaches referred to facilitating holistic development, and provided examples of interactions with learners to enhance their learning.
- While respondents across curricula referred to learning through play, a few responses indicated their use of the continuum of play for teaching and learning. This suggests the need for more focused training on the potential of different types of play in supporting the development of different skills in early childhood.

Practitioner perceptions of their role and that of the child

Perceptions of the role of the practitioner and the child are closely linked to the approach to learning through play. The Montessori approach, in particular, highlights the teacher as a role model, and teachers model the right way to approach each activity. The Waldorf approach holds that children learn by imitation, and the teacher is a model, but allows free exploration and has a strong focus on developing values and imagination. Reggio Emilia teachers are co-researchers with the children, who were constructed as competent and capable agents of their own learning. Mainstream practitioners gave few specific responses about their role and/or desired child outcomes.

Practitioners across all approaches gave examples of providing opportunities for individual, small-group and whole-group activities, but the Montessori and alternative pre-school approaches were focused more on each child, following their individualised learning trajectory. While Reggio Emilia activities are child-led, they stress the role of the small group in co-constructing learning. All aimed to offer age- and stage-appropriate activities. This was determined by observing children. However, in mainstream pre-schools, it was not often guided by structured assessment, but more by trial and error. The curricula all support children with special needs in some way, be it through strongly individualised teaching and learning (the Montessori and alternative pre-school approaches), a broad holistic curriculum (the Waldorf and mainstream approaches) or a child-directed learning focus (the Reggio Emilia approach). Access to specialist staff at the facility was an important resource to support children with disabilities or barriers to learning. This was absent in mainstream pre-schools. There is a clear need for training on this issue.

Practitioner perceptions of contextual factors that affect teaching and learning

Responses indicated widespread challenges in securing parental involvement in supporting their children's education by attending meetings and workshops that were offered across all curricula. Access to ongoing professional support and training was identified as valuable for practice and most varied in terms of the forms and focus of the learning and teaching process available at the Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia pre-schools.

The alternative approach relied on internet resources, but the mainstream pre-schools had fewer opportunities. Training for qualifications was limited in some cases by a lack of funding and low wages. Bread-and-butter issues, such as a lack of financial sustainability, limited space and poor infrastructure, were most often mentioned by mainstream pre-schools. However, difficulties registering with DSD were indicated by pre-schools that were not yet registered. This is a generic sector-related problem. A challenge with the regulatory framework that affects Waldorf and Montessori centres is the requirement for organising classes by age rather than using a vertical/mixed age grouping. A limited focus on learning through play was also indicated as a challenge by the Waldorf and alternative pre-schools.

Practitioner perceptions of the ideal learning environment

The role of a prepared environment, which provides a range of activities, is common to all these approaches, but was emphasised as key for teaching and learning by the Reggio Emilia and Montessori centres. One of the differences between approaches is in the type of materials and resources prioritised: purchased (mainstream or alternative) or upcycled (Reggio Emilia), natural (Waldorf) or specifically manufactured (Montessori). Open-ended materials (Reggio Emilia and Waldorf) promote imagination and problem-solving capacities, and are a cost-effective way of increasing available play resources. This would be useful for those mainstream pre-schools that reported being short of material, but gave few examples of using these. The involvement of parents and the broader community as part of the learning environment was also mentioned by all approaches, but the Waldorf, Reggio Emilia and Montessori centres gave more responses on educating parents so that they can support their children's education.

Practitioner understandings of school-readiness

All approaches identified children needing to be developed across many domains (e.g. communication, confidence, independence and physical maturity) in order to be school-ready, but different curricula emphasised different capabilities. The Waldorf and alternative pre-schools had a very strong focus on maturation and physical readiness (gross and fine motor skills).

The Montessori and alternative pre-schools followed a more targeted approach to teaching mathematics and literacy skills, which is in line with international evidence of best practice for school-readiness. Mainstream pre-schools made few references to the role of cognitive skills.

Implications of findings for the implementation of ECD policies

Practitioner reports of practice were considered in relation to the major policies and regulations governing ECD 0–4 years in South Africa, including the following:

- The National Integrated ECD Policy (RSA, 2015)
- The South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four (DBE, 2015)
- The Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Educators (DHET, 2017)
- The Children's Act, Act No. 38 of 2005, as amended, Regulations, Norms and Standards (RSA, 2010)

Respondents from all curricula reported an approach broadly in line with the National Integrated ECD (NIECD) Policy, which is guided by the NCF. There were differences in how strongly certain domains were emphasised. While all focused on developing self-regulation and the development of language and communication skills, the Waldorf curriculum had a strong emphasis on creativity and imagination. The Montessori and alternative pre-schools emphasised early literacy and mathematical skills. The Waldorf and alternative pre-schools had a very strong focus on motor development. While policy encourages home language instruction, English predominated, except at two rural mainstream pre-schools. This was likely due to very linguistically diverse enrolments and/or the fact that many of the practitioners were not conversant with the range of languages.

Learning through play is central to the NCF and the Policy for Higher Education ECD Qualifications. Different approaches tended to focus on different parts of the play pedagogy continuum, with the mainstream and Waldorf approaches favouring free play, the Reggio Emilia approach favouring co-opted play and the Montessori approach favouring playful instruction, whereas there is evidence that it is better to use all types of play to support learning. In relation to special needs, there are findings about the value of the individualised approach from the Montessori and alternative pre-schools, of a curriculum that is led by the child's developmental level (Waldorf) and a curriculum that is led by the child's interests (Reggio Emilia). There are also clear indications of the need for greater training and resource support for the inclusion of children with barriers in mainstream pre-schools.

In terms of age- and stage-appropriate activities, which are supported by targeted progress assessment, all curricula reported doing assessment, but it was less clear that mainstream pre-schools used these systematically to inform the choice of appropriate activities. This suggests a need for training on assessment and follow-up, and the implementation of more standard assessment tools such as those being developed for the NCF.

In relation to the Children's Act's norms and standards, which provide a compliance and regulatory framework for ECD programmes, the reported practice across the curricula aligned with these norms and standards, except for the mixed/vertical age grouping favoured by the Waldorf and Montessori approaches for teaching and learning reasons.

3. Limitations and recommendations for further research and action

These findings, and especially their implications for the wider ECD sector in South Africa, are tentative as the study sample is too small to be generalisable. In addition, providers of the non-mainstream curricula tend to be middle class, better resourced and receive more ongoing professional support and training than is the case with the average ECD provider in the country. Further research on some of the widely implemented South African NGOs' curricula would be a valuable addition to understanding local teaching and learning practice and practitioner perceptions.

Recommendations

Staff qualifications and professional development support

- The current programme of learnerships and support for ECD practitioner training should continue to aim at everyone receiving the entry-level NQF Level 4 qualification, with incentives and support provided for upgrading towards professional qualifications. Attention should be given to accessibility in terms of cost, format, language of instruction and proximity of training venues.
- Accredited learning programme content should be reviewed to ensure that sufficient attention is given to the underpinning curriculum and pedagogical (teaching and learning) principles.
- The quality improvement support system envisaged in the NIECD Policy should be put in place. Current initiatives of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the DSD to develop quality improvement and support are one aspect of this. The South African Council for Educators (SACE) has a potentially significant role to play in providing mainstream professional support and continuing professional development.
- Specific priorities for in-service training include the following:
  - The NCF, its application in the playroom and the use of the NCF's child-formative assessment package
  - A play-based approach and the use of different types of play to promote learning
  - A focus on a specific language and literacy, and numeracy and mathematics component within the play-based programme

Language policy

There should be a review of LoLT for ECD, taking into account the contextual challenges and School Language Policy, as well as the production of practice guidelines.

Special needs/barriers to learning

- The NIECD Policy provides for the development of multi-sectoral guidelines to secure universal access to developmentally appropriate, quality ECD services for children with developmental delays and disabilities, including additional funding allocations, trained practitioners and access to specialists. Training curricula should be strengthened for this purpose. This should be effected.

- Access to the NCF's child assessment tool would help mainstream pre-schools identify developmental gaps and target learning support for minor difficulties. This should be finalised and made available with training.

Parental involvement and education

- Efforts to engage parents should continue and focus on the learning programme and key issues such as learning through play, the language policy and supporting learning at home.
- Parents' circumstances should be recognised and ways of communicating should be found that are convenient and elicit interest.

Challenges to be noted

There should be discussion about whether accommodation could be made for the following:

- The need for greater flexibility regarding the application of the Children's Act's norms and standards about age grouping is noted as Montessori and Waldorf centres apply family-style grouping (3–6 years) for peer-learning support
- The overly formal application of the curriculum for Pre-Grade R and Grade R, and the resolution of departmental resistance to extend children's learning beyond the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) requirements, as for example in Montessori mathematics and early literacy.

In conclusion, this small study reinforces and highlights not only key and programming issues to be addressed, but also the possibility that sharing and collaboration across these and other approaches to early learning might help fill some of the programming gaps and enrich ECD quality and practice.

Contents

Acronyms

CAPS	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DSD	Department of Social Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ELDA	Early Learning and Development Area
ETDP SETA	Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority
FETC	Further Education and Training Certificate
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HWSSETA	Health and Welfare Services Sector Education and Training Authority
LoLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NDA	National Development Agency
NDP	National Development Plan
NELDS	National Early Learning and Development Standards
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NIECD	National Integrated ECD
NPO	Non-profit Organisation

NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PIECCE	Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
SACE	South African Council for Educators
SAMA	South African Montessori Association
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
Unicef	United Nations Children's Fund

A note on terminology used:

Approach refers holistically to the underpinning educational philosophy, curriculum, and learning and teaching practices (pedagogy).

Curriculum is the organised framework that informs teaching and learning (this includes the underpinning philosophy, teacher's role, scheduling and learning goals).

Teaching strategies refers to pedagogy, the method and practice of teaching.

1. Background to the empirical study

Umalusi conducted a longitudinal study, which focused on inferred CAPS entry-level requirements and exit-level outcomes across the ECD framework and the four school phases in South Africa. Although the ECD landscape currently precedes Umalusi's sub-framework, underpinning this study is the assumption that the nature of ECD provisioning in South Africa influences learners' performance in their formal schooling. The current developments, which include the formalisation of the NCF from birth to four years, and the migration of ECD to the DBE, calls for Umalusi to engage in the ECD discourse.

1.1 Appraisal of the National Curriculum Framework

An appraisal of the NCF for 0–4-year-olds, conducted by Umalusi, focused – in particular – on the anticipated (intended) level of development in numerical literacy, early language literacy and life skills. The appraisal also included a focus on inferred exit-level outcomes at the exit point of the NCF for 0–4-year-olds. The findings on the intended learning outcomes fed into a larger study to determine phase transitions from early learning to exit at Grade 12. The appraisal of the NCF also pointed to the need to investigate ECD provisioning in South Africa. The latter prompted the conceptualisation of an empirical study on the interpretation and implementation of the NCF and the underpinning pedagogical approaches that would steer the implementation of the curriculum framework.

The empirical study on the perceptions and the understanding of underpinning approaches in ECD provisions are aimed at providing insights into the choice and application of different approaches in the South African ECD landscape. The study also provided an opportunity to understand the dynamics of the Reggio Emilia approach, the Montessori approach, the Waldorf philosophy and the NCF at implementation level. The empirical study was informed by a situational analysis.

1.2 Situational analysis

According to the 2018 Mid-year Population Estimates (Statistics South Africa, 2018), there are 5 928 951 children from birth to four years old in South Africa. In a national audit of ECD conducted by the DBE, there were 23 482 ECD sites across South Africa, and 1 030 473 learners were enrolled at these sites. This was 16% of the child population (Statistics South Africa, 2016). These figures increased in the report for the end of second quarter of 2017/18, which stated that there were 28 268 ECD sites and 1 912 945 learners enrolled in the ECD sites.

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2012) attests that foundation skills in areas such as mathematics, science, language, the arts and ethics are essential components of a good education system. The attainment of these skills can only be ensured if all South Africa's children can access high-quality education and benefit from it. Furthermore, the NDP indicates that, for quality education to be a reality, a variety of ECD services and programmes that support the holistic development of a child should be accessible. Surely access to ECD has increased over the years? However, it is the quality of that provision that has raised questions.

Policy pertaining to early childhood development

The White Paper on Education and Training (DoE, 1995) called for the promotion of ECD as an essential step towards realising national education goals, and located education and training within the national Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The White Paper provided the foundation and set the direction for subsequent policies targeting ECD in South Africa as it spoke of an integrated approach with cross-sectoral linkages to achieve the national education goals. It was followed by the Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (Department of Education,1996), which prioritised the correction of past imbalances and the need to provide equal opportunities (Hwenha, 2014).

The launch of the Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development in 1996 provided a broad policy vision for ECD and considered the need for ECD programmes to be affordable and accessible to all, providing equal opportunities and multi-focused strategies. The paradigm shift from educare (which was the term commonly used before 1994) to early childhood development expanded the focus to encompass children from birth to nine years old, and also takes into account the difference in learning patterns depending on their age when they enter formal education (Republic of South Africa, 2015).

Later, White Paper 5: Early Childhood Development (Department of Education, 2001a) addressed the establishment of a national system of provision of the reception year for children aged five-years-old in public and independent schools. The procedures for the early identification and remediation of barriers to learning, including disabilities, through the public education system was addressed in White Paper 6: Inclusive Education (Department of Education, 2001b). However, children with disabilities are still excluded, especially in the ECD sector where early identification and remediation is critical (Berry et al., 2013).

This was reiterated in 2001 when it was stated that children from birth to nine years of age should grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially (Department of Education, 2001a). Therefore, the first years of life are critical in shaping a child's life well into adulthood. Several reports on the history of ECD provisioning in South Africa have noted the urge and need to tackle the inequalities of the past, which drives the common goal of the new ECD policy to recognise the diverse cultures and spectrum of the South African population and its needs. Day care centre models have been imported from Europe and the USA without critically considering the needs of the majority of ECD learners, (NDA, 2012). A very important aspect of ECD is early child care and education (ECCE) services, which are services and programmes that provide care and developmentally appropriate educational stimulation for groups of young children in ECD centres, (DPME, 2012).

The NCF was gazetted as policy in December 2015 and is linked to the NELDS document, which was published in 2009. The NCF builds on the desired results for children from birth to four detailed in the NELDS. It provides guidelines for those who develop programmes and work with babies, toddlers and young children. It is aimed at various ECD settings to be used by training organisations, universities, practitioners, parents and other caregivers to enhance children's learning and development. The policy promotes a holistic vision of ECD, which pays attention to the first 1 000 days up to the time when the child enters Grade R. The framework claims to take cognisance of the importance of this age as being the "window(s) of opportunities for interventions". Furthermore, the holistic development of the child is a central focus of the NCF, with the policy recognising the importance of intervention in the first 1 000 days of a child's development. The policy emphasises the development of cognitive abilities in children before schooling. The NCF is premised on the perception that quality ECD interventions lead to better school-readiness and academic achievement, and help develop essential skills for success both in school and in the workplace.

The DSD released an audit report on ECD with the aim of determining the extent of curricula implementation, learning programmes and learning assessments. Curriculum implementation in ECD programmes is imperative for the reduction of inequalities that exist within the education sector, and to prepare children for learning programmes in formal schooling (DSD, 2014). The South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four was developed and implemented with the purpose of providing advocacy materials for parents and caregivers on the importance of play-based learning and stimulation. In 2017, the Joint Portfolio Committee on ECD reported that 92 750 copies of the NCF on ECD was distributed across districts and provinces for further circulation and engagement with key partners and practitioners. The NCF has been versioned into Braille to ensure that all blind practitioners and parents have access to the programme. Less than 50 deaf teaching assistants were trained on the NCF to ensure that all children at schools for the deaf have access to the programme (Joint Portfolio Committee on ECD, 2017).

Qualifications for ECD practitioners/teachers

For the child to develop holistically, a knowledgeable teacher should be able to provide a learning environment for quality teaching and learning, regardless of the situation or facility in which a child is placed. In South Africa, different ECD qualifications were established on the NQF. Training in ECD qualifications is offered by a number of training institutions that must be accredited by the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP-SETA) (NDA, 2012). Training institutions also include technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, universities, non-profit organisations (NPOs) and private colleges. The minimum standards for ECD teacher requirements were set by the DSD and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) in the Guidelines for Early Childhood Development Services (DSD, 2006), stating that the minimum qualification for any ECD practitioner is the NQF Basic Certificate: ECD (Level 1) (NDA, 2012). Researchers have reported that the qualification level is not always associated with children's learning outcomes (Dawes et al., 2019) or higher-quality classrooms (Biersteker et al., 2016). The study of the National Development Agency (NDA) found this specifically for classes catering for older children, but found that qualification level was found to be positively correlated with quality care in classes catering for infants and toddlers. Research findings by Hwenha (2014) highlighted the high practitioner turnover in ECD centres. It was discovered that practitioners tend to leave in search of better-paying opportunities once their training is complete, and some drop out before completing their training. This creates challenges as practitioners require constant and extended coaching and support to improve and maintain ECD service delivery standards, (Hwenha, 2014). In 2017, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) issued its Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Programmes leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Educations (DHET, 2017). For the first time, there is provision for an entry-level Higher Certificate in ECCE, initial professional qualifications in the form of a Diploma and bachelor's degree in ECCE, and a range of post-professional qualifications – an Advanced Certificate in ECCE, an Advanced Diploma in ECCE and a Postgraduate Certificate in ECCE, as well as postgraduate degrees. Some of these programmes were in development at the time of the study. This is a significant step towards professionalising the ECD workforce.

1.3 Research design and methodology

The study is framed in a qualitative approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) assert that qualitative research places the researcher in the world of the participants. They maintain that the qualitative researcher should make the world visible. Elsewhere, Creswell (2007:46) mentions that a qualitative study "is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of the participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants, describes and analyses these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner".

The aim is not to generalise the findings of this research, but rather to narrate the experiences, voices and stories of practitioners and managers in the South African ECD landscape. A qualitative enquiry allowed for a more informed understanding of the working world of the participants and their perceptions.

In terms of the research design, a multi-case study approach was adopted for the investigation. The aim of the analysis was not so much to compare as it was to garner the interpretation of the approaches and the influence of the environment, if any. A qualitative and quantitative content analysis was therefore adopted (Coe & Scacco, 2017).

One of the disadvantages of case study research is that findings from a single case site may not be readily generalised to other case sites (Nayak & Singh, 2015). In the context of this study, the cases are the four ECD approaches, which include the Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf and ordinary ECD centres.

Sampling

The site selection was based on purposive sampling to represent urban, rural and semi-rural South African landscapes. Both the Western Cape and Gauteng were chosen for their more urban layout, while Limpopo and the Eastern Cape covered the semi-rural element.

The ECD centres were chosen based on their philosophy, curriculum and location (rural vs urban). Interviews and classroom observations were conducted in Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Waldorf ECD centres subsidised by the DSD, also referred to as mainstream centres in this study. Researchers could not locate a centre using the Reggio Emilia approach in Limpopo, therefore, a centre using an eclectic curriculum, based on occupational therapy practice and other elements, and referred to as alternative, was selected. The approach of the research team was to identify the various centres across the provinces. The aim was to observe the enactment of ECD approaches in these differing contexts.

Table 1.1 represents the profile of the selected participants. It shows the qualifications of respondents by the number of years they have been in the ECD environment, as well as their associated approach.

Table 1.1 Profile of selected participants

Participant	Qualification	Number of years in ECD environment	Approach
1. AP1	Studying ECD Level 5	4	Alternative
2. NCP1	Level 4	19	Mainstream
3. NCMA1	Level 5	29	Mainstream
4. AP2	BA	2	Alternative
	ECD online course		
	ACE Grade R		

Participant	Qualification	Number of years in ECD environment	Approach
5. WP1	Level 5	11	Waldorf
	Diploma in ECD		
	Trained as a Waldorf educator		
	Currently doing Diploma Grade R		
6. WMA1	Two-year training in Waldorf education	5	Waldorf
7. MMA1	Diploma in Montessori education	8	Montessori
8. AP3	Registered with Unisa	3	Alternative
9. AM	Four-year Diploma	24	Alternative
10. WMA2	BEd and Level 5 ECD	19	Waldorf
11. WP2	Level 5 ECD	16	Waldorf
12. MP1	Level ECD	13	Montessori
	Montessori		
	Nursery Educators' Diploma		
13. MP2	None	4	Montessori
14. MMA2	Level 2 pre-school qualification	15	Montessori
	Montessori Diploma Level 5		
15. MP3	Montessori training 0–3 and 3–6	5	Montessori
16. NCP2	N4 qualification in Educare	< 1	Mainstream
17. NCP3	N5 qualification in Educare		Mainstream
18. NCMA2	Level 4	16	Mainstream
19. NCMA3			
20. RP1	Three years in pre-school	2.5	Reggio Emilia
	Locum teaching		

Participant	Qualification	Number of years in ECD environment	Approach
21. REM1	High school educator and Deputy Principal	3	Reggio Emilia
22. NCP4	N5 Foundation Phase qualification	7	Mainstream
23. NCMA4	Level 4	16	Mainstream
24. NCP5	Level 5	8	Mainstream
25. RP2	Level 4	17	Reggio Emilia
26. REM2	Level 6 (BEd)	18	Reggio Emilia
27. RP3	Level 4 in Leadership	5	Reggio Emilia
28. RP4	Level 4	8	Reggio Emilia
29. WP3	Level 4	1	Waldorf
	Waldorf in-house training		
30. WP4	PGCE	< 1	Waldorf
31. WMA3	Degree in Botany		Waldorf
	ECD Level 4		
32. MP4	Level 5	8	Montessori
	Montessori Diploma		
33. MP5	ECD Certificate	-	Montessori
	N5		
	Montessori Diploma		
34. MMA3	Teaching Diploma	40	Montessori
	BA		
	International Montessori Diploma for Pre-school		
35. NCP6	Level 4	5	Mainstream

Participant	Qualification	Number of years in ECD environment	Approach
36. WP5	ECD Level 4 First Aid Level 1	8	Waldorf
37. NCP7	Level 4 ECD	2	Mainstream
38. NCMA5	Level 4 ECD	18	Mainstream
39. RP5	Higher Diploma in Education	12	Reggio Emilia
40. RP6	Qualified pre-primary and primary school educator	6 months	Reggio Emilia
41. REM3	Traditionally trained, Foundation Grade R	19	Reggio Emilia
42. MMA4	International Montessori Diploma Head Start Montessori Diploma	16	Montessori
43. MP6	Matric In-service training	16	Montessori
44. MP7	Matric Current – Early Childhood Montessori Education	6 months	Montessori
45. WMA4	Arts degree, diploma in high school teaching, university education diploma, diploma in nursery school teaching, qualifications in Waldorf education from in-service training	40	Waldorf
46. RP7	Degree with Unisa	9 (three years at Reddam)	Reggio Emilia

Table 2 is a summative depiction of the number of respondents by their job roles and approach.

Table 1.2: Number of *respondents* by *job role* and *approach*

Sample		ECD approach						
		Waldorf	Reggio Emilia	Mainstream	Montessori	Alternative	Total	
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Number
Job role in the school	Practitioner	5	7	7	7	3	29	29
	Management	4	3	5	4	1	17	17

Table 1.3 illustrates sampled schools, their provincial location, child enrolment ratio, respondents, as well as the age of the classes observed by approach.

Table1.3: The sampled schools, location, enrolment, respondents and age of classes observed by approach

Approach	Province	Children 0–5	Practitioners interviewed	Managers interviewed	Ages of classes observed
Mainstream	Limpopo	36	1	1	Two classes of 3–4 years
	Western Cape	123	2	2	4–5 years
	Gauteng	50	3	1	4–5 years
	Eastern Cape	33	1	1	3–5 years
Waldorf	Limpopo	41	1	1	Two classes of 3–6 years
	Western Cape	40	1	1	2–3 years and 4–6 years
	Gauteng	8+ missing	2	1	3 months to 3 years
	Eastern Cape	21	1	1	Two classes of 3–6 years
Montessori	Limpopo	50-60	1		Toddlers and 3–6 years
	Western Cape	80	1	1	1–3 years and 3 – 6 years

Approach	Province	Children 0–5	Practitioners interviewed	Managers interviewed	Ages of classes observed
	Gauteng	83	2	1	18–36 months, 3–5 years
	Eastern Cape	21	2	1	30–42 months and 3–6 years
Reggio Emilia	Western Cape	7+ missing	2	1	1–2 years
	Gauteng	152	3	1	18–24 month and 3–4 years
	Eastern Cape	16+ missing	2	1	3–4 years
Alternative	Limpopo	48	3	1	3–4, 4–5, 5–6 years

Mainstream ECD centres

Those facilities termed "mainstream"[1] ECD centres or pre-schools are most likely to represent the majority of ECD programmes in South Africa. However, practitioner and management qualifications are better than average.[2] All four centres were well established, founded several years ago, registered and subsidised.[3] The subsidy is means tested, which means that the children served are from lower socio-economic groups. While registration and subsidisation, and trained staff are not the average, they provide a useful case sample for comparison because they meet intended South African standards. All four sites were African-managed and had been established in response to a community need for ECD centres.

[1] In the background report, these were referred to as NCF, but as they were not necessarily following this, the category title has been changed to mainstream.

[2] The situation in South African pre-schools is that an estimated 70% of ECD practitioners working below Grade R are untrained and the majority of those trained have NQF Level 4 or Level 5 certificates in ECD. In her State of the Nation Address in 2019, Minister Motshekga indicated that: "Of approximately 110 000 ECD practitioners, 35 210 (30%) have ECD NQF Level 4 or more."

[3] A very large proportion of ECD programmes are not registered. Of those that are registered, a limited number receive the per child subsidy from the DSD.

Waldorf ECD centres

With the exception of the Eastern Cape centre, these pre-schools are attached to Waldorf primary schools. Grade R in Waldorf schools is integrated into the 4–6-year-old class. Three of the principals interviewed were responsible for the whole school and provided general information on the approach. The Limpopo, Gauteng and Eastern Cape pre-schools are situated in quite remote/rural areas and the Limpopo school is attached to a farm. The urban Western Cape school has a policy of including disadvantaged children through a fee assistance programme and there are many children of farmworkers in the Limpopo enrolment. Two of the pre-schools have a baby class.

Montessori ECD centres

The four Montessori schools are all urban-based, middle-class pre-schools with English as the LoLT, although they may have diverse learners. Each of these centres had children in both the two main age groups for which the Montessori curriculum provides – under three years, and three to six years. Three of the managers had founded the schools, two specifically with a view to sharing their Montessori backgrounds, and one had trained in Montessori when she took up a post at that school.

Reggio Emilia ECD centres

All three Reggio Emilia-inspired pre-schools were based in urban areas – two were part of a white-run private primary school. The manager in Cape Town was not an early childhood specialist, so his responses were administrative and managerial rather than about ECD practice. None of the managers were directly involved in teaching. The third pre-school was a black-owned pre-school in Gauteng. Reasons for adopting a Reggio Emilia-inspired approach varied. The Eastern Cape principal was traditionally trained, then adopted Montessori methods, but wanted more creativity and art. On the other hand, the manager of the Gauteng pre-school, who also had previous training in Montessori methods, seemed to be looking for more curricular guidance. The principal explained that they had not been included in the Gauteng Department of Education's NCF training and needed support in curriculum planning.

Alternative ECD centre

This was a substitute in Limpopo where no Reggio Emilia pre-school was identified. The centre is mostly managed and run by qualified white middle-class practitioners. Class sizes are small with approximately 12 children each. It started as a playgroup and then, by demand, grew into an ECD centre of 48 children from three to six years, organised in age cohorts. English is the LoLT, although most learners are Sepedi home speakers. The principal/manager has, in the past, supported occupational therapists as paraprofessionals and there is a strong occupational therapy influence on the skills prioritised in the curriculum.

As can be seen (although there is missing data), enrolments varied across all approaches.

1.4 Research instruments

The data collection instruments were designed to cater for both semi-structured interviews and observations. These are attached as appendices A and B.

1.5 Data types

The research methods that were utilised included both interviews and classroom observations. Educators and principals of the ECD centres were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and included a set of questions directed at the respective parties, while allowing for more questions to arise from the conversation. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they provide freedom in allowing for dialogue and a better understanding of the content being discussed. Pandey and Pandey (2015) further state that they allow for further probing on unclear matters, assist in dealing with delicate topics and allow for better insight into the respondent. This proved to the team's advantage where respondents were not clear on some of the questions and also allowed for further probing into loaded statements. An interview schedule was developed to guide the interviews. The same questions were used for all interviewees to ensure consistency and comparability, with flexibility allowed in the event of new information arising.

The data collection included classroom observations at the centres. The researchers were stationed in classes for children of different age groups. The research team spent a day at each centre, both observing learners in the classrooms and conducting interviews with practitioners and principals. Observations of the following age groups were conducted: 0–3-, 3–4- and 5–6-year-old learners. While the team sought to be consistent in this regard across all centres, this was not always possible due to the dynamics of a centre or school. In some centres, the 0–3-year age group was not available, and observations were made of 2–3-year-olds. In addition to the observations, interviews were conducted with practitioners and principals.

An observation instrument was used to compile researcher observations on the classroom practice. An advantage of the observation method is that it is suitable to use when observing children who are unable to provide verbal reports of their feelings; subjective bias is eliminated, and it is independent of respondents' willingness to respond (Kothari, 2004). The use of an observation instrument and three different observers served to eliminate the issue of bias and allowed for improved transparency and accountability in reporting. The observation method is the most appropriate to evaluate the behaviour of children (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). It also allowed participants to be observed in their natural settings, thus providing a more natural way of gathering data. Through the observations, the researchers sought to see the implementation of the curriculum and to observe learner behaviour and responsiveness to the educators. The researchers were passive participants and ensured that their presence did not distract participants from the daily programme. The use of an observation instrument also lent itself to what Kothari (2004) terms structured observation. In structured observation, the observation is characterised by a careful definition of the units to be observed, the style of recording the observed information, standardised conditions of observation and the selection of pertinent data of observation (Kothari, 2004). The instrument used by the team was detailed and specific in the type of information required for compilation.

1.6. Analyses

Qualitative and quantitative content analysis was used in these analyses (Coe & Scacco, 2017). Broadly, quantitative content analysis is a method where textual (in this case) material is systematically categorised and coded for the purpose of analysis. There are many ways of conducting these analyses. The approach is outlined below.

The process of analysing data followed:

1. The ECD content specialist read the research questions, background data and observational checklists, reviewed all interview transcripts (reading and re-reading) to identify emergent themes in relation to broader ECD thinking, NCF goals and practices. The framing of the interview question was as would be expected. Thereafter, the principal investigator met to discuss and refine preliminary codes with the Umalusi staff member who had independently familiarised herself with the data.
2. The ECD content specialist and colleague then reviewed all transcripts separately and, using the themes and sub-themes in Table 1.1, in combination with the content of the interviews, created a set of variables and categories to allow for quantitative and qualitative triangulation and so facilitate a comparison of the different approaches. In total, 41 variables were created based on the content of the transcripts. These were captured in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, where all transcripts were codified. This data was then imported into an SPSS file for initial analyses. The data produced by these variables (and codes) was then reviewed, and variables that did not contribute to a theme or sub-theme were removed. After this process had been completed, this data set contained 29 variables, all matched to the themes and sub-themes listed in Table 1.1. Initially, some of these variables lacked detail. These variables were reviewed and expanded to include all necessary sub-categories. Below is a rationale for the themes and codes for all variables and a list of those contained in the current SPSS dataset.

Staff qualifications and ongoing professional development: These are of interest in relation to overall qualification levels in the sector and recognition of the critical importance of continuing professional development (CPD) (intra-school collaboration and support at site level (internal) and externally) in ensuring the quality of programme delivery. It has potential implications for which practices might be built into quality assurance systems, capacity building and for supply planning.

For quantitative analysis, the following were coded:

- The respondent's time at the school (in years)
- The NQF level of their highest educational qualification, untrained or other
- The presence and type of intra-school collaboration, and external professional development

Curriculum[4]*:* This overarching theme covered the underpinning philosophy, such as the view of the child and how and what children (including those with special needs) should learn, the practitioner's role, resourcing and planning. What is understood as school-readiness is examined in relation to both how each curriculum constructs it and to the NCF's early learning and development areas (ELDAs). Daily scheduling, resources and materials provide the structure for the programme, as does the planning in terms of age- and stage-appropriate activities, progress assessment and special needs. Policy understanding of the NCF, NELDS and/or CAPS has been included here to determine the degree to which these inform the different curricula.

For quantitative purposes, the following were coded:

- The respondent's familiarity of the NCF, NELDS and/or CAPS (unfamiliar; familiar)
- The approach to play (free – focus on children's self-selecting activities, focus on teacher-directed playful activities, balance of both)

[4] An organised framework that informs teaching and learning (Excel & Linington, 2020).

- The approach to the daily schedule (unknown; rigid schedule; flexible schedule)
- The resources and materials present (natural, improvised and found materials; manufactured/bought materials; books)
- School-readiness: Domains reflected – physical (gross and small muscle control), social/emotional, cognitive and language
- Age- and stage-appropriate activities include explicit mention of the following activities, which are linked to the NCF's early learning and development areas:

NCF's early learning and development areas	**Activities identified as indicators**
• Wellbeing	• Gross and fine motor activities
• Identity and belonging	• Emotional and social development
• Communication	• Language activities
• Exploring mathematics	• Numeracy activities
• Creativity	• Problem solving, creative expression, the arts
• Knowledge and understanding of the world	• Investigate objects, materials, the natural world, technology, social and cultural knowledge

- General approach to special needs (no approach; support from within the school only; support from within the school and referral to specialists)

Teaching strategies (pedagogy[5]): Strategies for managing interactions/learning and teaching practices in the classroom have the greatest impact on child outcomes and have been distinguished from each overarching curriculum framework described above. This theme includes how each strategy provides for learning through exploration, encouraging confidence and participation, handling behaviour and collaborative learning in partners or small groups.

[5] The method and practice of teaching (Excel & Linington, 2020)

Language policy might also have been classified as part of the overall curriculum as the NCF encourages home language instruction, but the question was directed to practitioners' practice in the classroom rather than the pre-school policy (and in fact there was some variation in approach among staff within pre-school centres), so it was categorised as part of this theme. Finally, managers/principals were asked how they monitor the quality of child learning. This is included here as it is directly related to teaching and learning practice.

For quantitative purposes, the following was coded:

- Language of learning and teaching: English, vernacular and translanguaging (the use of other languages to support children's understanding). This was to ascertain the extent to which home language was used as the LoLT and how language and communication was approached in pre-schools with leaners with diverse linguistic profiles.

Collaboration: This theme has two subthemes:

- The role of parents in the programme: This is an element of both policy and legislation compliance and quality programming, and something that is a key challenge for many ECD programmes in South Africa. Parent education around the programme is distinguished from building a parent community (involvement in pre-school socials) and their involvement in activities to support the pre-school.
- Collaboration with other schools and the broader community: This is distinct from communities of practice to enhance understanding and delivery of the particular approach, which is included in professional development. It may include disseminating the approach and/or outreach and charitable drives as part of the life of the pre-school in the community.

Thereafter, all data was reviewed against the agreed-upon codes by manually reviewing the coding summaries of the content specialist, confirming evidence presented in the interview text, and comparing the approaches to coding over time to check accuracy.

For quantitative purposes, the following were coded:

- Parent: School social involvement, e.g. graduations, plays, festivals, fêtes, picnics
- Support for the pre-school, e.g. workdays, helping with fundraising, providing extra supervision on school outings
- Educational activities, e.g. workshops, open days, communication to parents about the curriculum and how to support their children's learning
- School and community collaboration: none; interschool collaboration; interschool teacher collaboration; community outreach

Challenges

Financial challenges: not present; present

Table 1.4 provides a summary of the research sub-questions, the interview questions intended to solicit responses to those organised into the emergent themes. Principals/managers and practitioners were asked different questions, leading to fewer observations on some themes and sub-themes.

Table 1.4: Study questions in relation to the organising themes and sub-themes

Study research question	**Themes and sub-themes**	**Practitioner interview questions**	**Principal/manager interview questions**
	Facility information		
3	Background, establishment		1
3	Staff and student complement		3

Study research question	Themes and sub-themes	Practitioner interview questions	Principal/manager interview questions
	Staff qualifications and development		
1	Teaching qualifications and experience	1, 2	2
1, 3	CPD and support, internal and external mentorship	3, 4	8, 9
3	Quality systems for teacher development		12
	Curriculum		
2	Policy understanding	20	5
1, 2, 4, 5	Understanding curriculum approach (how children learn, importance of play)	5, 10	4
1, 5	School-readiness	15	15
2	Daily schedule	8	
2	Age- and stage-appropriate activities	9	
2	Special needs	15	7
2	Progress assessment	7	11
4	Resources and materials	11	

Study research question	Themes and sub-themes	Practitioner interview questions	Principal/manager interview questions
	Teaching strategies		
2	Learning through exploration	14	
1	Language policy	18	
2	Encouraging confidence and participation	12	
1, 2	Partner/small-group collaboration	13	
1, 2	Handling behaviour	6	
4	Quality monitoring of child learning		13
	Collaboration		
3	Parent	19	6
3	School and broader community		14
3	Challenges (integrated into different themes where they arise)	16	10
3	ECD sector in South Africa	21	17

2. Findings

In the section that follows, the data is presented according to the different themes, and the approaches are contrasted. Given the case study design, the intention of the analysis is to learn from the different approaches rather than describe typical practitioner understandings and practices.

2.1 Staff experience, qualifications and continuing professional development

2.1.1 Years of ECD experience

While research on the association of qualifications and teaching experience with classroom quality and children's learning outcomes is mixed and South African data suggests that there is not a significant relationship (Biersteker et al., 2016; Dawes et al., 2019), qualifications are a requirement of the Children's Act and the DBE, ETDP SETA and Health and Welfare Services Sector Education and Training Authority (HWSETA) have made considerable budget allocations to qualifications training over the last 20 years.

Figure 1 indicates the mean experience of practitioners and principals/managers across the different curricula.

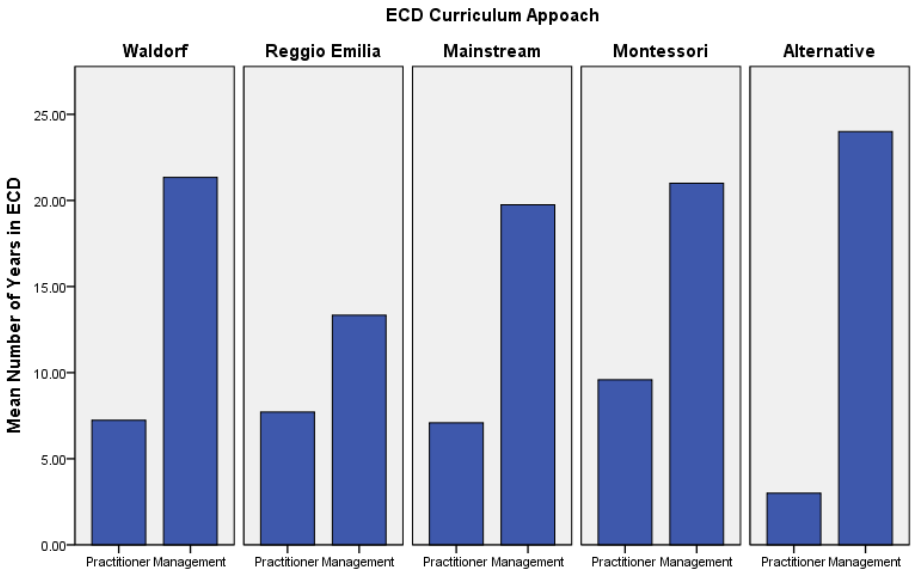

Figure 1: Mean years of experience in ECD

As seen in Figure 1, across all approaches, managers have been working in ECD for extended periods. Even though Reggio Emilia managers have less experience than those in the other approaches, their experience is considerably higher than that of practitioners following the alternative approach. Overall, practitioners also have a reasonable length of experience relative to other local studies (Biersteker et al., 2016; Dawes et al., 2019; Dlamini et al., 1996).

2.1.2 ECD qualifications

There have been few opportunities in South Africa for ECCE study at degree level and beyond the NQF Level 5 qualification and Diploma in Grade R. The qualifications at NQF Level 7 are educational degrees, but not ECD-specific.

In the two cases where a practitioner has the N5 Educare qualification (i.e. has not completed the supervised practice needed for N6), it was coded as "other" as it is not equivalent to the ECD NQF Level 5. There are many ETDP SETA-accredited providers who provide NQF-linked accredited qualifications with a Montessori approach; but equally, there is other training available, which is not accredited by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), including international diplomas and non-accredited training programmes that are offered locally. These have been coded as "other". The Centre for Creative Education, a registered private higher education institution (HEI) in Cape Town, offers certificates and degrees with a Waldorf education focus, and practitioners in the Western Cape have NQF-accredited Waldorf qualifications. However, most staff are introduced to Waldorf education through in-service training, many following a standard South African qualification.

Of interest is that certain principals/managers are responsible for an entire primary school or Foundation Phase department and, as such, may not have a deep understanding of the ECD birth-to-four-years curriculum approach and teaching strategies because their training and main focus is in General Education and Training.

Figure 2 presents the practitioners' qualifications by approach.

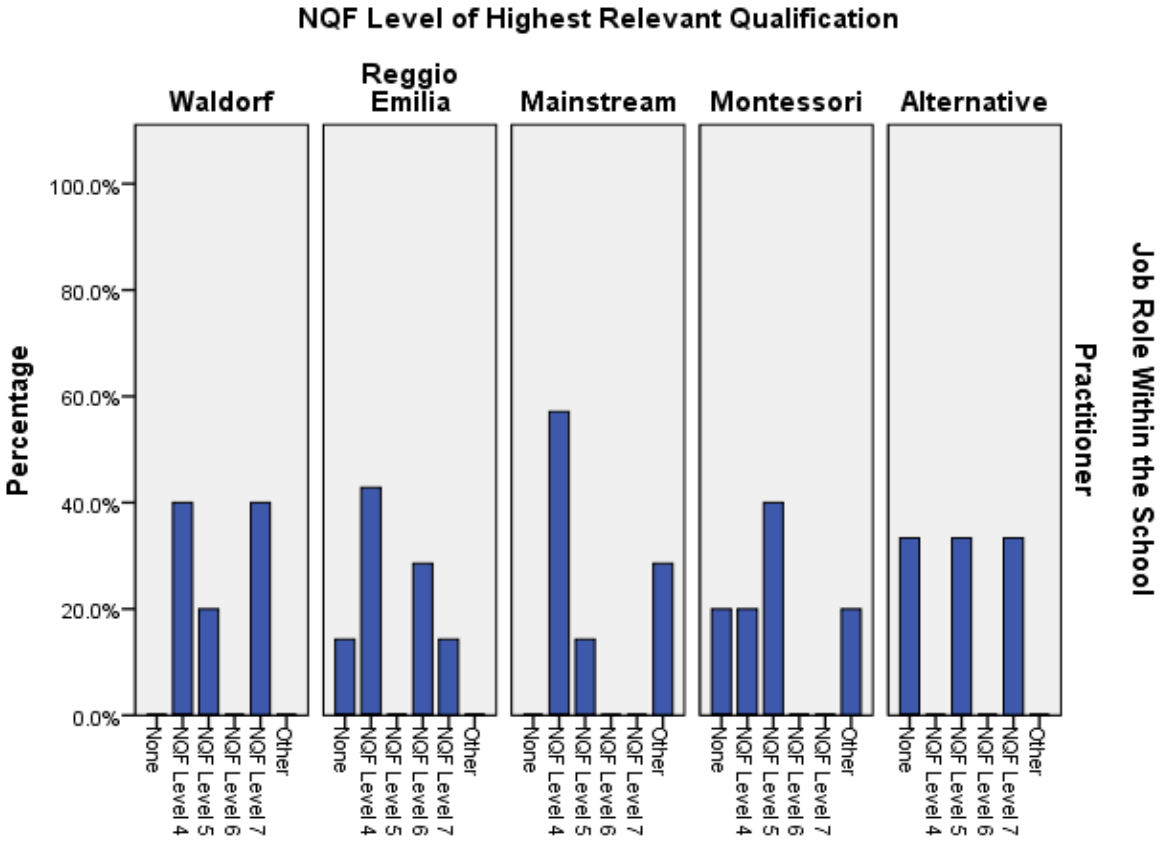

Figure 2: Practitioners' highest relevant qualification

As seen in Figure 2, most approaches employ practitioners with a variety of qualifications. Only mainstream practitioners are different from the others in that many practitioners have an NQF Level 4 qualification; a further two have an N5 Educare qualification (coded "other") and none of the mainstream practitioners have relevant qualifications ("none").

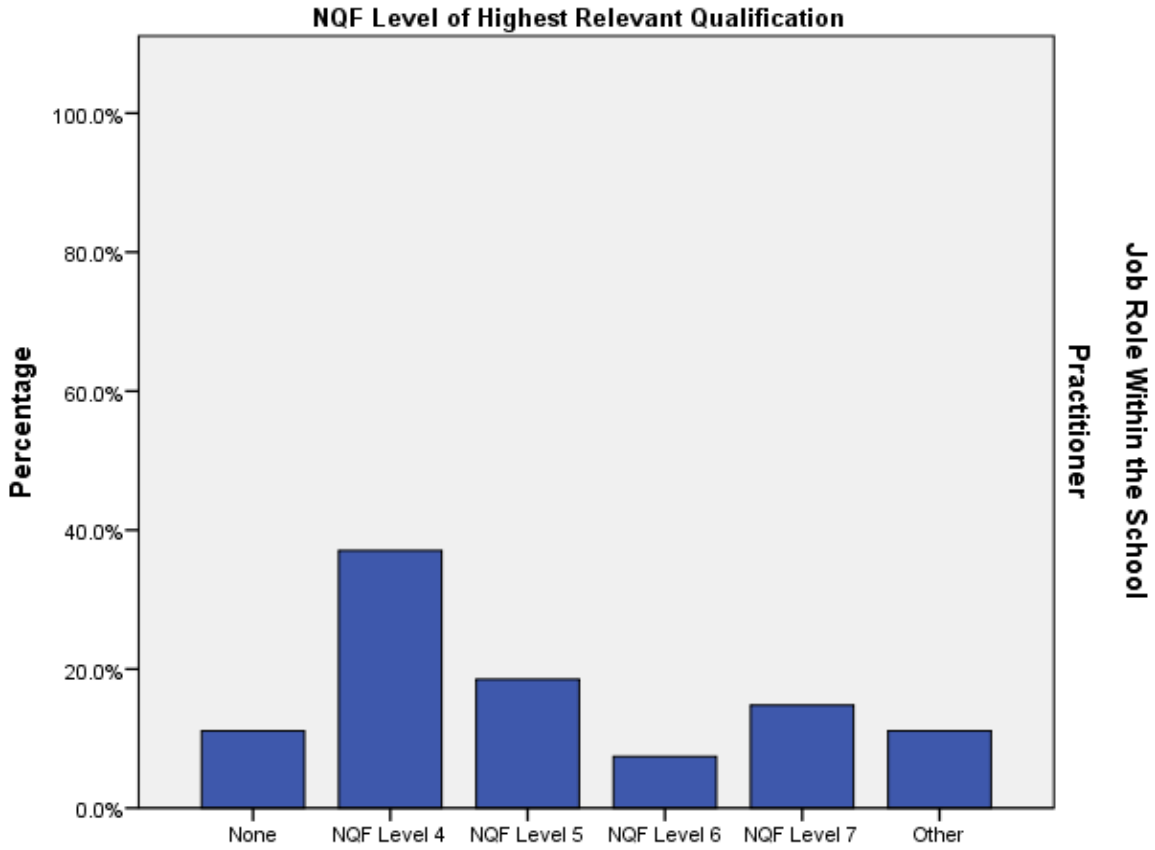

Figure 3: All practitioners' highest relevant qualification

Figure 3 summarises all practitioners' qualifications (without splitting them up according to curriculum). For practitioners, the FETC ECD NQF Level 4 is the most popular qualification.

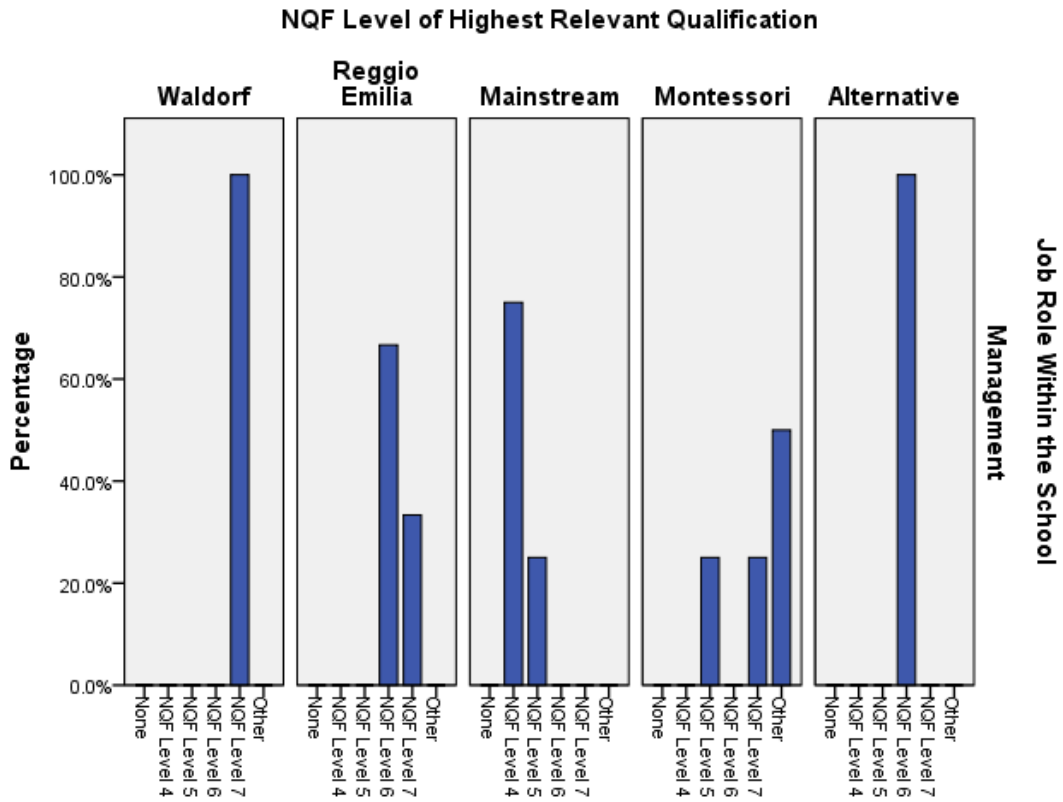

Figure 4: Managers' highest relevant qualification

All managers across all approaches, with the exception of an additional administrative manager at a mainstream school (excluded from Figure 4), have some educational qualification, although, in three of the mainstream pre-schools the principals only have an ECD NQF Level 4 qualification.

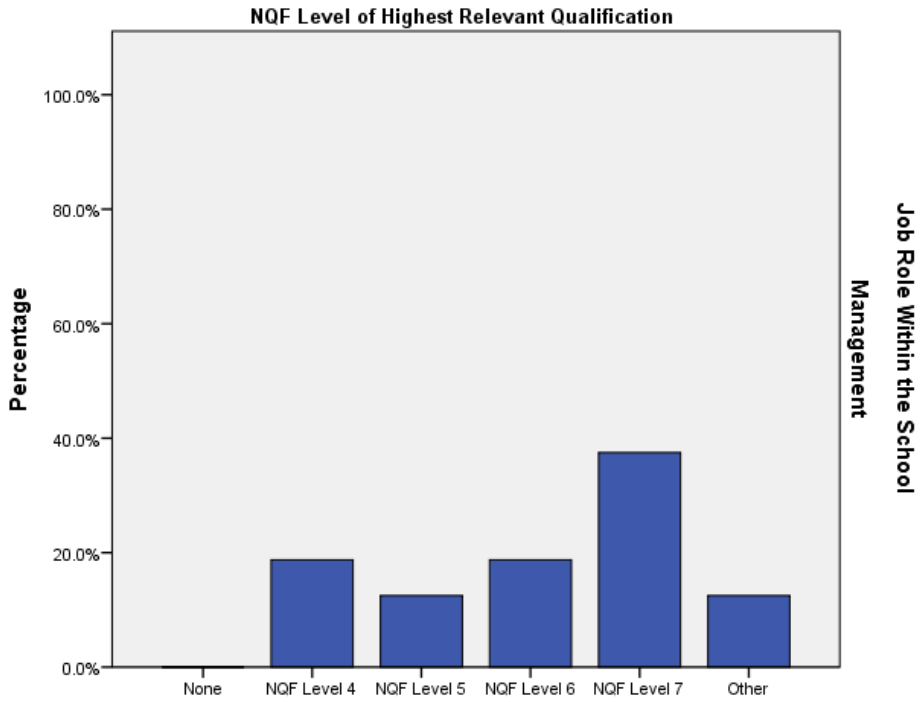

Figure 5: All managers' highest relevant qualification

As can be seen in Figure 5, all managers had some qualification, and 37.50% had a degree. The NQF Level 4 and Level 5 are ECD 0–4-specific, but the NQF Level 7 is a BEd degree.

2.1.3 Continuing professional development and support

Interview questions

- Are you afforded opportunities to develop yourself professionally? If so, mention these. (Practitioner)
- Are you afforded any opportunities for collaboration with other teachers? How does this impact on your teaching? (Practitioner)
- What professional development opportunities do you provide your teachers and yourself? (Principal)
- Do you provide opportunity for teacher collaboration? If so, explain. (Principal)
- What quality systems do you have in place for teacher development? (Principal)
- What quality systems do you have in place for the children's learning? (Principal)

Evidence of the importance of ongoing professional development, directed at specific aspects of teaching practice, for quality of ECD programme implementation, is conclusive (Early et al., 2007; OECD, 2012). Recent reviews of effective continuing professional development (US Department of Education, 2010; Eurofound, 2015) and a consensus study on key issues for training the ECD workforce in low-resource contexts (DFID, 2017), as well as a range of smaller studies, highlight the key components for practitioners' continuing professional education to support the effective delivery of early childhood programmes:

- Mentoring and supervision
- A focus on practice linked to knowledge
- Reflection and peer learning
- Specific training focused on interaction skills
- Motivational management and leadership

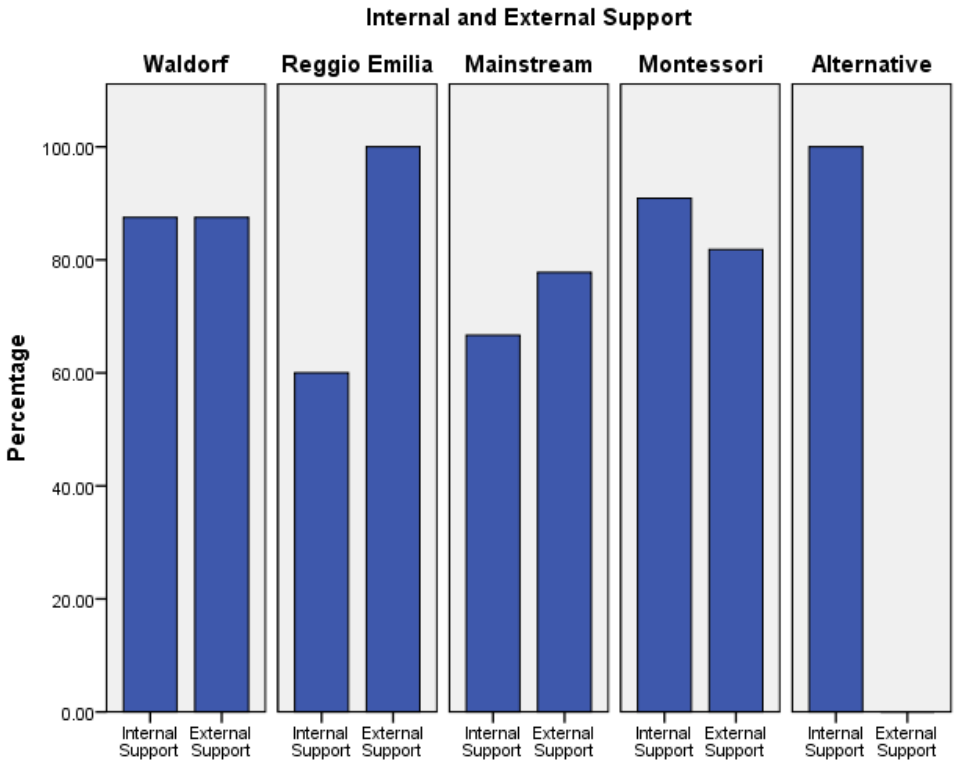

Figure 6: Internal and external support

As seen in Figure 6, most curricula have a combination of internal and external support. However, the alternative pre-school differs in that it receives no external support.

Ideally, as indicated in the cited literature, continuing practitioner support should be both internal, with inputs from more experienced colleagues with peer-learning opportunities, and external, with refresher support and training, and access to a community of practice.

As can be seen in Figure 6, all the approaches in this study provided some form of ongoing support. Leadership support was ascertained in this study by a question to managers about what quality systems were in place for teacher development. This question is not frequently asked.

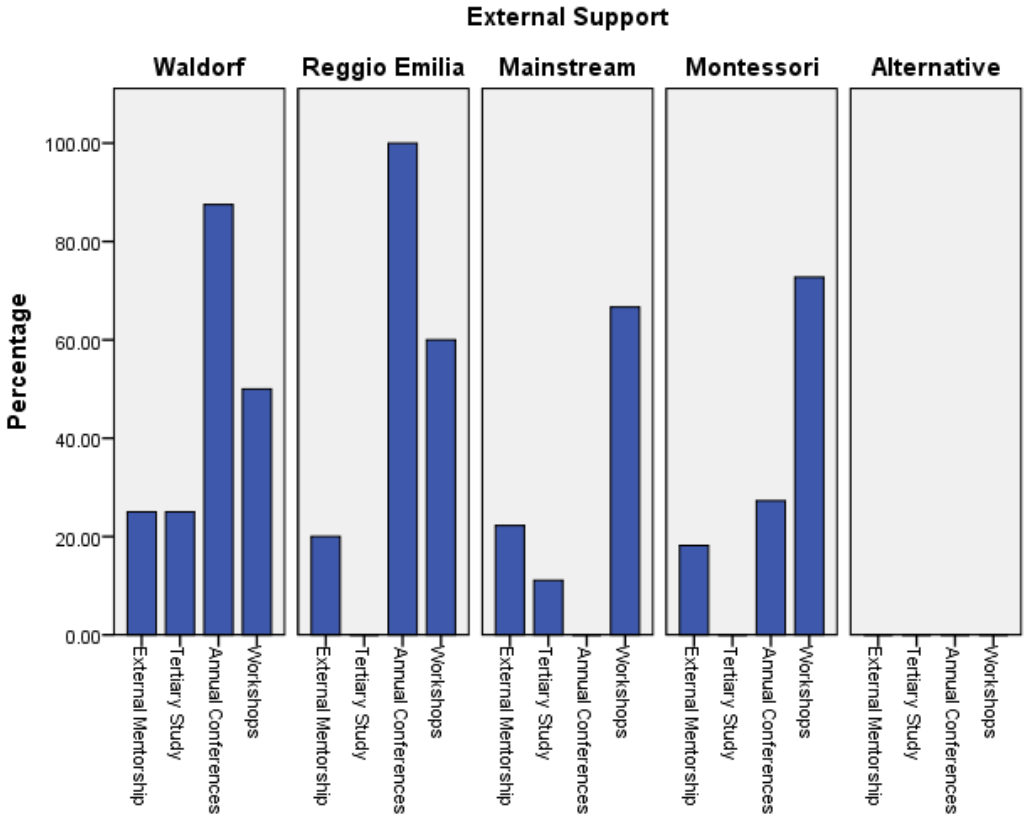

Figure 7: External support for quality learning and teaching

As seen in Figure 7, four distinct types of external support were identified. Workshops include allowing practitioners to attend external seminars. Annual conferences differ from workshops in that they take the form of collaborative sharing and learning opportunities, and are part of an annual schedule. Tertiary study is limited to formal support for certificate, diploma or degree qualifications. External mentorship includes accessing knowledgeable persons from outside the school to enhance the learning and practice of practitioners (and sometimes management).

Figure 7 shows that, except for the alternative model, which is distinct from external opportunities and follows its own customised curriculum, all approaches provided examples of different forms of external support for teaching and learning. The mainstream schools did not have access to the organised systems of external support evident at the Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia schools through mentoring, conferences and national associations.

Mainstream pre-schools gave examples of some local ECD forums organised by DSD that provide training mostly on safety and protection issues, as well as ad hoc-training from provincial education departments. One had found a mentor from a well-established local school and, to solve lack of capacity, many of them were using programmes from NGOs.

> *Those opportunities are scarce where you find the teachers being invited to workshops. As ECD centres, we have umbrella bodies that we operate under and then we end up depending on them for information.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

> *Good Hope Forum (through the DSD) [has] workshops on how to upskill teachers – this is for the principals of 30 crèches.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Gauteng

One practitioner mentioned NCF training by the provincial education department but commented:

> *[We] still need support. Yes, we even told them that since you have conducted this one workshop you must select some a month or days where you come and train us in detail.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Limpopo

By contrast, the Waldorf Federation, South African Montessori Association (SAMA) and the Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance were reported to provide national and some local conferences and workshops, as well as external mentoring for their affiliates.

> *The Waldorf Federation mentor travels to all schools to ensure that teachers are doing what they [are] supposed to be [doing]. We exchange some of our work with teachers in Bryanston. The mentors provide us with weekly feedback.*
>
> Waldorf Manager, Limpopo

> *Yes, we have mentor meetings every Tuesday. I am a teacher assistant. We get regular training on how to observe a child, spiritual, holistic and bodily development of children, as well as on moods of children and how to stimulate the children to love learning. Waldorf also pays for three staff to attend the annual conference. Workshops are held here. We share offerings and best practices at these workshops.*
>
> Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

> *The Montessori Association and teachers and assistants are a close community. At any time, we can walk or approach our colleagues here or at another centre for help or advice. Rachel* is our mentor. We can freely ask for advice. She has a lot of experience which she shares with us.*
>
> Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

> *SAMA, the Montessori Association, is phenomenal with that [support]. For example, the SAMA Conference I sent my teacher on, I wasn't able to go because I'd just had my little boy and they recorded everything for me.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Limpopo

There is also informal networking between Montessori schools:

> *[We are] going next week to a different Montessori school to get some new in-look, you know, and how they do it.*
>
> Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

> *I belong to all the Reggio groups on Facebook, and … once a month we go to Cape Town, usually at UCT, it's a group that gets together and actually discusses things, so we have tried to learn more about it like that.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Western Cape

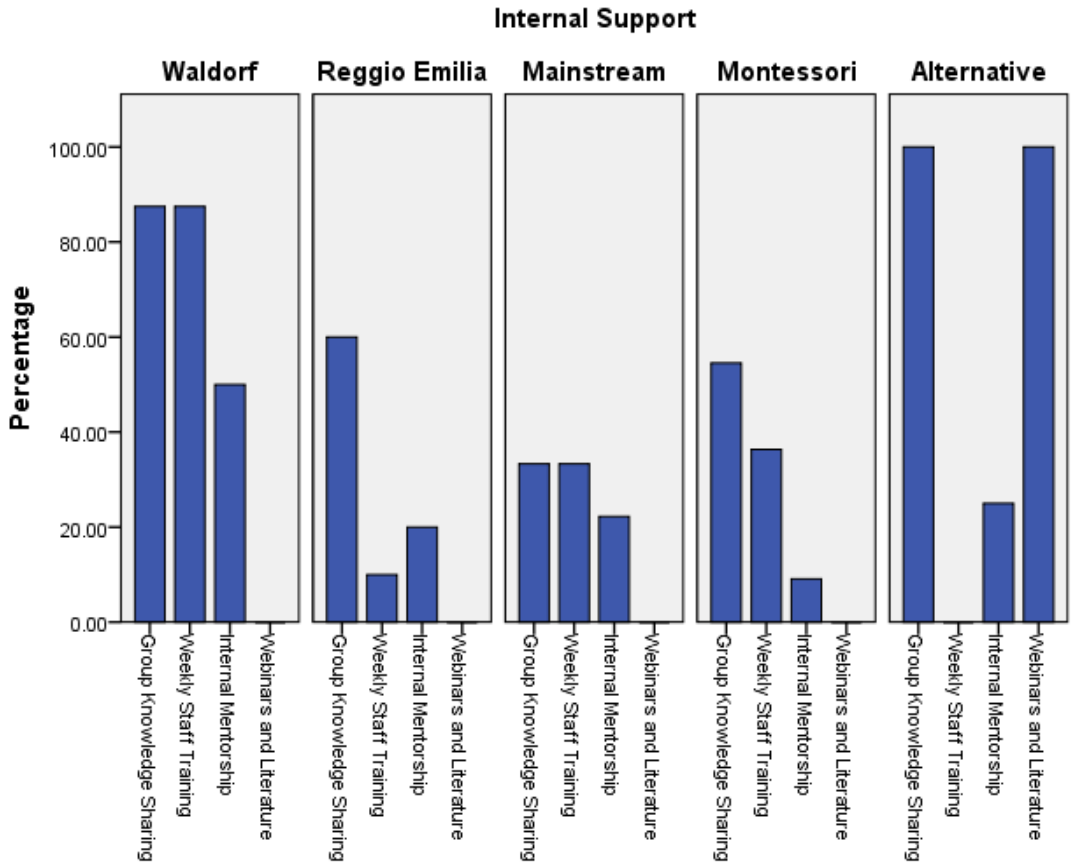

Figure 8: Internal support for quality learning and teaching

As seen in Figure 8, four distinct types of internal support were identified. Webinars and literature include the sharing of online learning and audio-visual materials alongside literature. Internal mentorship includes ongoing support from a manager, or more experienced practitioner. Group knowledge-sharing commonly supports this, and allows practitioners to try and share techniques. Finally, weekly staff training describes a system of training, run by the school, which takes place on a weekly basis.

All the approaches made use of various kinds of internal professional support. Planning together was common and respondents gave examples of times when teaching staff unpacked child and curriculum issues. This is institutionalised in the Waldorf schools that have a weekly child study session.

Fridays we have meetings where we discuss the theme for the following week so that they can collect what they need to use.
Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

Sometimes we organise a workshop, we sit with the teachers, the volunteers, when the children are taking a nap then we talk about the challenges that we're facing on a daily basis.
Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

Teachers also present what happens in class at our weekly meetings. Often discussions happen around this and suggestions are made for improvement to teaching and learning.
Waldorf Manager, Limpopo

Coming back to implement it was a bit of a challenge. Until we started sitting, you know when the children are sleeping and they are having their lunch, we would take the key elements of Reggio; …we would then elaborate on what do they mean and so that is what we are building.
Reggio Emilia Manager, Gauteng

We meet and share ideas of how to deal with issues or how to improve on strategies we have tried.
Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

We … collaborate within the staff …. This works for us and helps a lot. ... We each have different teaching styles and practices and we share our best practices with each other.
Alternative Practitioner

In-service training was particularly important for the niche curricula where the principal or more experienced staff often had to train a practitioner, previously untrained or trained on another approach in their programme. For example, the Montessori-qualified Eastern Cape principal explained:

> *I have a meeting with them every single week and in my holidays and public holidays I have meetings with them, and I train them myself.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

The alternative pre-school in Limpopo, which is remote from other support opportunities, makes use of webinars as its main professional development activity.

> *Mostly we do online webinars, we get together and they do it individually. And it's usually developmentally focused, what is age appropriate, what is new on the field of early childhood development.*
>
> Alternative Manager

There were also examples of an internal mentor or the principal observing what happens in class and commenting. While no direct examples were given of follow up on the feedback given, it is implied in the way that responses were phrased.

> *[The] principal rotates and observes in class … how and what can improve.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

> *I have a mentor… She is a mentor to others also because she has been here a long time. We have weekly staff meetings.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

> *I go and visit the classrooms or maybe the head teacher will go and visit the classroom and then will come and give a feedback in the office on whatever. We use a checklist.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Manager, Gauteng

I don't teach so I visit the classrooms every week… just to get a feel of what's going on, probably that's our best form of control, I check their planning, what are they doing.

Reggio Emilia Manger, Eastern Cape

The principal … started to train me and she sits in [on] our classes quite often. And she will tell you, you are still struggling with that.

Alternative Practitioner

However, there was less internal support in the mainstream schools and the degree of support and oversight was clearly limited in the following case:

We plan as a team. I go to their classes and complete observation forms, we do planning together. But I never check their work. I once told them that each must have their own record book to show weekly progress. None of the teachers ever reminded me to check their books, but I also did not ask.

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

2.2 Curriculum approach

This overarching theme includes sub-themes relating to the organised framework that informs teaching and learning, commonly referred to as curriculum in the early childhood care and education sector. This includes scheduling and underpinning beliefs and goals as much as programme content.

2.2.1 Familiarity with South African curriculum guidelines

Interview questions

- Were you exposed to the ECD national framework/NELDS? If so, what is your understanding of this document? (Practitioner)
- What is your understanding of the ECD national framework/NELDS? (Principal)

While the question focused on the NELDS/NCF, several respondents also referenced the CAPS, especially those who include Grade R classes. This theme has therefore been framed as familiarity with South African Curriculum Guidelines.

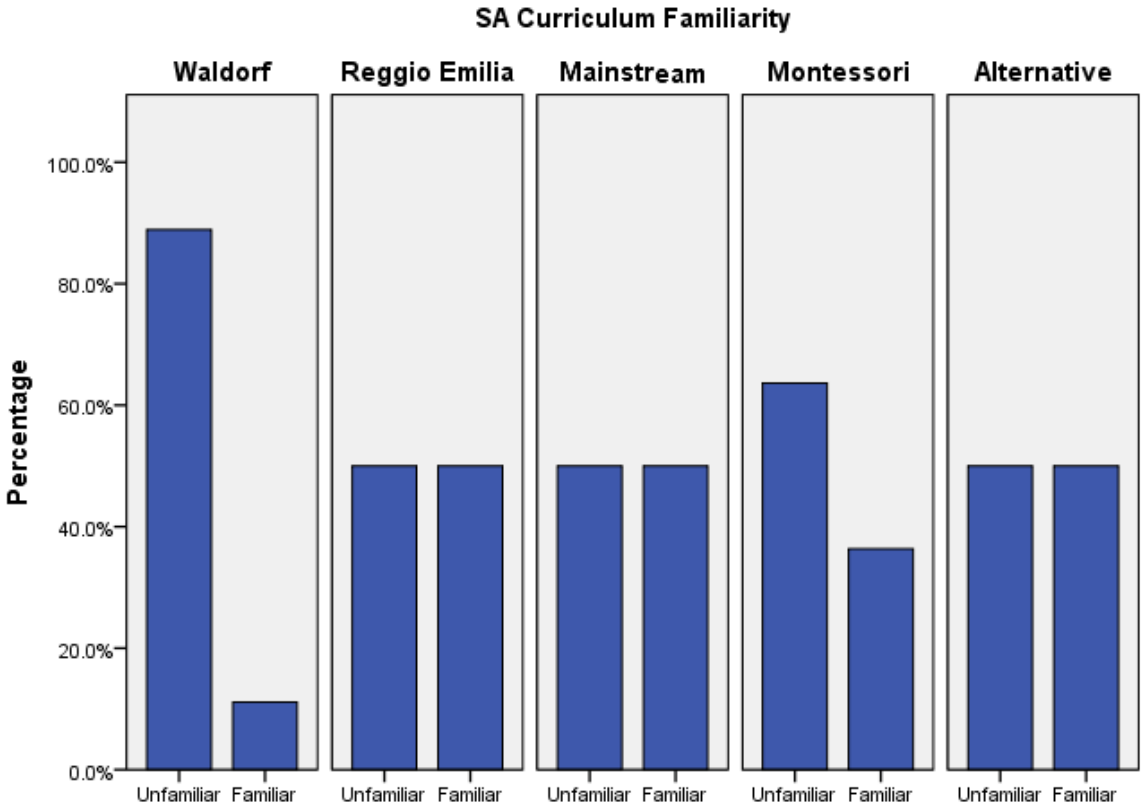

Figure 9: Familiarity with South African Curriculum Guidelines

Of interest is the high proportion of respondents who were unfamiliar with the South African Curriculum Guidelines, given that they provide mandatory policy guidance. This includes the mainstream schools, which, as registered facilities, would have been the target for provincial education department training on the NCF.

Half of the principals had been trained on the NCF and one referred to the CAPS. Two practitioners knew what the NCF was. Their interpretations of the NCF spoke to elements that must have been introduced in provincial training rather than the ELDAs.[6]

So, the NCF helps us to plan. We know what we should do in January, February, March until year end. We are directed by the plan. If it is January and we are doing "my body", it will be "my body" throughout the month.

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

There has to be a checklist… where you check the kids, when they bring them in the morning you have to check when they bring them that they are okay and not sick because something might happen if you didn't check … and also lesson plans how they work, weekly plan.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

But several had no knowledge of the NELDS/NCF at all or were aware of it, but had not been trained in it.

Not yet, but NELDS – is it part of the NCF? I haven't done the training for NELDS. They do provide training for this at ELRU (a local NGO). We want to register for NCF.

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

For the other approaches, familiarity with the NELDs/NCF depended very much on where the respondents had received their training. There was more familiarity with the CAPS. Some respondents believed that, as independent schools, they did not need to adhere to these.

We don't engage with the ECD national policies. Our vision is that of Waldorf.

Waldorf Manager, Limpopo

[6] "Colleagues who have attended some provincial training reported that there had been lists of topics/themes handed out with suggested calendars in the Western Cape. Practitioners have been taught to use themes to integrate their activities by many training providers. Topics are also used in Grade R." (Personal communication, Anya Morris, Grade R specialist). Perhaps in view of this, the National ECD Alliance team, who are writing materials to support NCF rollout for DBE and Unicef, have taken a theme-based approach to cover the ELDAs. This material is not yet available.

I had a look at the CAPS, which only focused on Grade R, which was very strict and formal and not a lot of games, but a lot of information and I've got a pet peeve on that. I am not happy with formal instruction with kids before the age of seven.

Alternative Manager

The following observation from the alternative approach suggests a complete lack of understanding of the NCF:

I've heard about it [curriculum framework], but it's too formal for us. Because we don't like to sit there, the children need to play, and we must be involved with the children.

Alternative Practitioner

However, other respondents were aware that the guideline is broad enough to cover different curriculum approaches.

Being an independent school, we enjoy the right to use our own curriculum – which is different, but in line with the national curriculum.

Waldorf Practitioner, Limpopo

We incorporate the Montessori Method with the CAPS.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

I would say it's applicable it's just for Montessori and following Montessori and having the mixed ages, it's slightly different, but I mean it's all the same stuff that we do.

Montessori Manager, Western Cape

Some of the independent schools' respondents made useful comments on the South African Curriculum Guidelines, highlighting the interpretation of the guidelines and the need for training to know how to use them to plan activities.

You know, I think, the hope and intention of this NCF, it's not bad… it's just when we unfold it and how we unpack it and how the teachers are supported, and how they are trained.

Waldorf Manager, Western Cape

I look at CAPS as a good document. The problem with CAPS is people interpret it incorrectly; they see that as a bible of education and it's not, it's a guideline or framework. [I] use the framework and look at the outcomes and make sure you reach those outcomes for children...

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Eastern Cape

NCF, we see it as a guideline, but the curriculum tells you what to do but the how part of it, it doesn't really tell you how to do it.

Reggio Emilia Manager, Gauteng

2.2.2 Understanding of their curriculum's approach to teaching and learning

Interview questions

- What is your centre's teaching approach (in what ways do you believe children learn best)? (Practitioner)
- Describe your centre's approach to teaching and learning? What informs it? (Principal)

This theme covers the different respondents' understanding of how children learn/their view of the child, key elements of the curriculum they practise, the role of the teacher and strategies for teaching and learning through play.

In Waldorf, all the respondents were familiar with the key beliefs and practices of the approach, and implementation was remarkably standardised. Based on an understanding of the child's stage of development, there is a focus on developing the physical, social and emotional, and not overemphasising the academic at this stage. To this end, a number of practical skills are developed through handwork and practical tasks. The environment is set up to provide for choice with a focus on instilling a feeling of beauty. The route to learning is play and imitation. Waldorf classes have a mixed age grouping of three or four to six years.

The children learn through imitation, imitate the teacher and sometimes their peers. They observe what the teacher does, they observe and then do it themselves. Such as painting, drawing, baking; watch[ing] what mom and dad do at home such as gardening, doing the dishes, doing laundry. When we integrate these into playing and teaching and learning, it's amazing to see how they can relate and also do these things.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

[Our goal is] to prepare balanced children in such a way that they have inner freedom, initiative and self-discipline; to awaken a consciousness of values such as honesty, integrity and regard for other human beings. To promote experiences in a balanced variety of disciplines: academic, artistic and practical to develop the child so they may discover their interests and realise their potential. At Waldorf, we understand that the child goes through different levels of development. So, we need a curriculum that is developed to meet the social, emotional and physical state of the child.

Waldorf Manager, Western Cape

We believe that the physical body and the life of a child need to be developed. It's only then when they have moved beyond that that we start the real intellectual work.

Waldorf Manager, Eastern Cape

There is a strong focus on imagination and make-believe play, as well as appreciation of nature and the use of the seasons, each with a related festival as themes, as illustrated in the following typical quotes:

We allow very much for imaginary play where they make believe. It can instil in that child the belief in himself, the trust in himself, the responsibility in himself and the imagination to become absolutely anything that he desires, so it's really that that we are working on, the deeper self-importance of the child.

Waldorf Manager, Gauteng

There is an emphasis on respect for nature. Steiner believed in things called elementals, nature spirits you can't see, but are out there in the woods. We are very based around the arts; children spend a lot of time outdoors. There are gardening lessons.

Waldorf Practitioner, Limpopo

They learn through exploration in play. They go for walks in nature, in the forest. The children are encouraged to look for natural things on these walks, or even during everyday activities at home.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

Reggio Emilia-inspired approaches are underpinned by the view that the child is competent and capable and should be trusted to take care of their own learning. Children learn through interest and exploration, which requires the setting up of an interesting environment, including "provocation tables", and essentially create their own curriculum. Different learning styles are recognised (the 100 languages of children). There is documentation of what children do and say to inform planning and reflection for the practitioner. Work is annotated and made visible to the children.

> *Give the child the material and you will see what the child can bring out. They take charge of their classroom, that's one of the things and even the materials, if they are offered the materials, then the material tends to provoke their curiosity; they start to ask questions themselves, they start to interact with one another and such. So rather (that), than when you have a classroom where you have to instruct the children all the way.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Manager, Gauteng

> *An emergent curriculum – that for me means we run with what the children are interested in … The environment as a third teacher, that's what we're trying to do, and then any natural products that come in, to enhance the curiosity of the child and what they are interested in at that time.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Eastern Cape

> *This is their space and that they can do anything that they want to do here. It's probing them and asking them questions and a lot of investigation, and hands on…they investigate, they bring things from home all the time on my table there, the shells or something that they find interesting.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Western Cape

> *…one [child] may learn visually, one sensorially. In the traditional school, we rely more on verbal communication learning. What about the child that learns through doing? Or the child who does not want to speak, but you see him going to the block and build a beautiful construction and you can see the plan and everything in there. The child gets the opportunity in the Reggio approach to do that, there is no right or wrong and they work together.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Unlike the Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia approaches, there is not a common mainstream curriculum. These pre-schools often draw on support and curriculum content from NGOs and other established programmes of quite a diverse nature, including an ECD franchise (GROW), content from a creative education programme (Africa A plus), content purchased from another ECD centre, and the Loaves and Fishes curriculum received during training. Following common mainstream ECD practice in South Africa, children were organised into age cohorts.

Yes, we do have a curriculum that we follow. It's from Loaves and Fishes.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

GROW is just an umbrella, we collect ideas from everywhere. We use GROW as a guide. We take any information that helps.

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

In describing their approach, the mainstream pre-school respondents typically focused on activities they offered and their use of themes (topics) as integrating organisers for learning programme content:

A different theme for each week, for instance now we're focusing on the winter season. So, we look at the different things that take place in winter, until Friday. Yes, they do play with toys and building blocks. Through playing with beads, they're also learn[ing] about different colours.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

…toddlers; they need to have their theme. Same applies to the pre-Grade R. We started Grade R this year, we have a learning programme, we still need to do CAPS, but we know that we need to do CAPS. But we prepare the learning programme for the year according to the themes.

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

… in this class, first they must know exercises, that they train their gross motors, the small muscles and the big one, and then they have some balls, they take that ball and they throw [it] in the bin, and then number two, they crawl, they crawl left, right, left, right, so that I can see all the sides are working … Then we have different blocks, they arrange in colours, we sit at the green table and I tell them to bring green objects, and they can see when someone is wearing green… With colouring we look at how they hold the crayon and [how] the fingers work, using fingers they count up to ten, they are able to tell seasons of the year, and are able to do nursery rhymes with actions.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

Most respondents were able to clearly articulate the key features of Montessori practice, including the individualised approach, mixed age grouping for peer-learning support, the carefully prepared environment, which encourages exploration, the activities, including practical life, sensorial, maths, language, geography, botany and zoology, and cultural. The child has a free choice of activities, which are then demonstrated by the practitioner. Respondents explained that vertical mixed age groupings are employed, with a curriculum for 1–3 years and another for 3–6 years. This provides different learning opportunities for younger and older children. Typical descriptions of the approach are presented below according to these different features.

The Montessori approach is different because, firstly, every child is treated as an individual. Every child you sit with one-on-one, it's not the whole class. Number two, the curriculum is individual, they're not all doing the same curriculum every single day.

Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

Most of the time, the little ones are learning from the older ones, you know. So, the older ones are providing the information as well and engaging and the little ones are listening.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

It's child-centred, your classroom is set up; they talk about the prepared environment…(It's) set up all child size for them to be able to reach it, to be able to take it out on their own…. So a child comes in in the morning and they are free to explore with the equipment, take any activity, it's all about repetition.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

First of all, we have different sections in a class, we have practical life, which is pouring, spooning, small movements and stuff like that; we've got sensorial, language, we've got geometry, we've got maths, zoology, botany, we've got loads of different areas. There is only one (of each) material so the first thing that children learn is how to wait their turn until their friend has finished putting it back on the shelf. Every work has got its place; it teaches them that where they have taken it off and must put it back because the other friends know that is where they will get the work from.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

Practitioners emphasised the practical life skills and sensory learning areas in the examples they gave:

The practical life area …where the children learn all sorts of life skills, like tying bows and knots, whisking, washing dishes, polishing, cutting and slicing bananas… folding up cloths, an apron, a little shirt, a sweater.

Montessori Manager, Gauteng

Montessori – we learn through our senses. If you take for instance the alphabet letters it's sandpaper letters, it's soft so that the child feels it because by the fact that the child feels it the brain registers it more by feeling the sandpaper.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

Some Montessori pre-schools used themes as content organisers, but in others, the focus was more on the five areas of activity.

This time we do art, most of the times according to the theme, we have a theme every week.

Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

Themes don't exist, but Montessori approach of the practical life, like grace and courtesy is used in our strategies to teaching.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

The alternative pre-school takes an eclectic approach, drawing from a range of different sources, but strongly influenced by occupational therapy goals and activities. All three practitioners mentioned the SPICE areas of development as important domains for teaching (social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional).

My approach is incorporating a lot of approaches... We do a little bit of Montessori; a little bit of … it's also like an informal setting. I usually get my information from overseas because we are part of Early Childhood Investigations (a group that investigates early childhood; to see what is working and what is not). They've got a big framework and they give free webinars regularly that you can login and do the development at your scale and incorporate their programmes. So we do Chris Buffel approach, which is the power teaching; we do the behavioural concept where it's a programme "Lovies and Grouchies", it's about emotions… And then we incorporate sensory experiences … so that the kids can be involved with all their senses in the learning, not just academically and focusing on information.

Alternative Manager

Our main focus is (to) develop the kid physically and emotionally.

Alternative Manager

We take a lot from other approaches and try to integrate it into our teaching and learning. We strive to provide an environment that is stimulating and exciting for exploration. We believe this allows the child's brain to work. We also try to foster a love for learning so that the child can satisfy their inner need in a self-fulfilling way in a carefree, pleasant learning environment.

Alternative Practitioner

2.2.3 Play-based teaching and learning

Interview question
• Describe whether you are able to integrate play time into learning. (Practitioner)

The play-based teaching and learning approach being promoted by the DBE conceptualises play as existing on a continuum, defined by the relative activity, choice and autonomy of children and teachers. While different educational researchers use different terms, the continuum is essentially the same. Zosh et al. (2017:29) use the umbrella term "playful learning" to cover free or child-led play, guided play in which adults scaffold child-led play, as well as games in which adults design, set rules and scaffold the play with a learning objective.

Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013) similarly propose a continuum that distinguishes pedagogical play from free play or child-initiated play. Pedagogical play includes open-ended play in which teachers provide materials for children to explore, modelled play in which they demonstrate how to explore materials, but children may choose whether to follow, and purposely framed play where children must follow the teacher's demonstration. For Zosh et al. (2017), "direct instruction", and similarly the work of Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzi (2013), which is highly structured, is not seen as play.

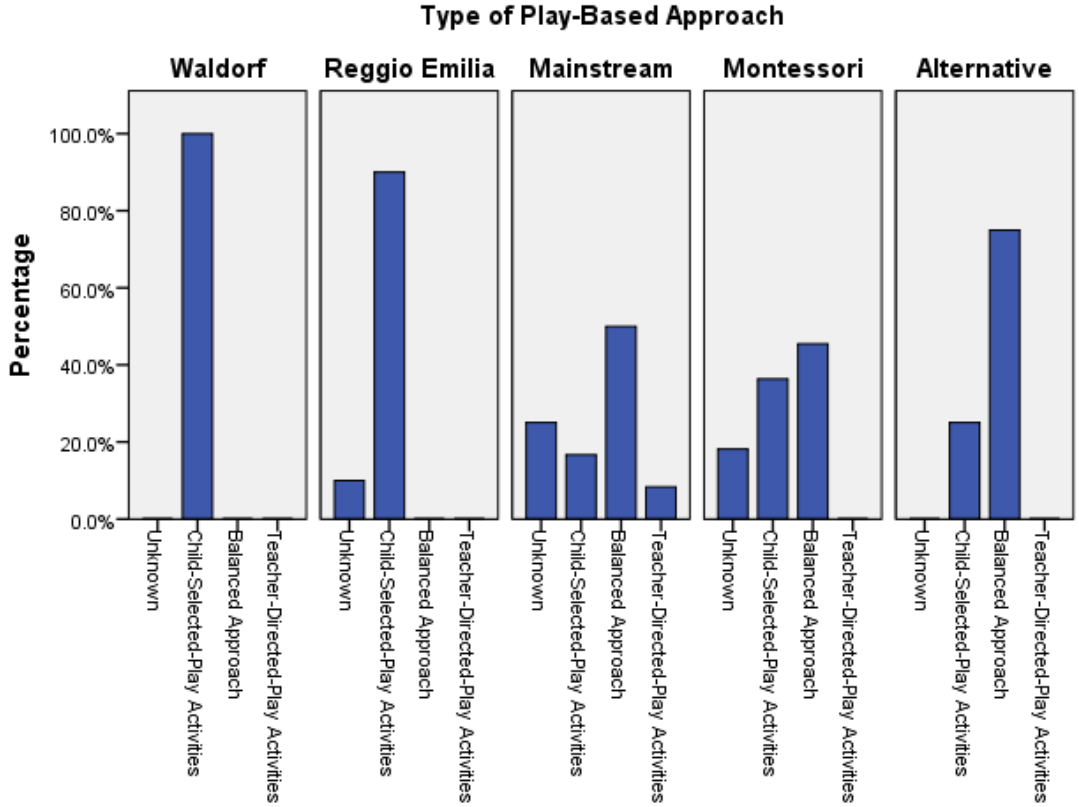

Figure 10: Types of play-based approaches

As seen in Figure 10, four categories of play-based approaches were identified. Teacher-directed play activities reflect those practitioners who almost exclusively direct children in or to different play activities. Child-selected play activities reflect those practitioners who almost always allow children to self-direct. A balanced approach is a combination of the two. Where it was not clear which approach a practitioner favoured, these practitioners were identified as "unknown". The Waldorf and Reggio Emilia approaches both favour a child-centric approach, while the other approaches favour a balanced approach.

Waldorf respondents explained that all learning at Waldorf for this age group is done through play and that it is also linked to imitation, especially of household tasks. There is active avoidance of formal learning.

> *Most of our learning is through play. We focus on play. It is integrated into learning and learning is integrated into play. An example is counting through rhymes.*
>
> Waldorf Practitioner, Limpopo

> *They can imitate you, and through play they are able to learn easily and develop… to wash the dishes because at the fantasy corner they do that, even at home they copy their mothers carrying the babies and they do that; and they express their feelings there. There they also learn to share and socialise with their friends.*
>
> Waldorf Practitioner, Eastern Cape

One Waldorf practitioner talked of extending children's play:

> *I encourage and push them to go further, to build higher towers, to thread more beads, to make more shapes with the dough etc.*
>
> Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

In Reggio Emilia, all the types of play on the play continuum operate from free play through co-opted play, where practitioners ask questions around things that children are doing, to playful instruction activities, where the practitioner sets up micro teaching opportunities through the provocation table.

Mainstream practitioners talked about learning through play, although their examples often indicated free choice play.

> *Through play… like when they play with tyres… they strengthen their bones and muscles. Even the mind is working. If I am rolling the tyre, I must make sure it does not hit another child as it will injure them.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Limpopo

> *We believe in developing the whole child through play. They learn through play, you know. Example*: *a puzzle on body parts, they can play with this in the fantasy corner. They love doing this.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

The following practitioner distinguished free play and learning-focused (more directed) play:

> *Most of the time, free play for me is not a big time, it's about 35 or 45 minutes. Because I also have some educational plays inside, indoors for me. They play, they study, they learn, they do everything. Those fitted toys they end up playing, but I see that they are learning. Also, some puzzle[s] they are very playful, but the more the child plays when you start and finish the puzzle, you see the picture. You're supposed to play, but with a learning focus, much more than the free play.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

Montessori respondents did not talk about play in the same way as the other approaches. There were many references to fun with learning, and free interaction with materials during work time, but when asked about "play", the responses tended to be about designated free play time.

> *Learning must be fun. The children must be able to have fun and not even realise they are learning.*
>
> Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

> *They can play outside and if they do want to go inside and engage the work as well, they're welcome to do that. But during the work cycle because it's very much based on movement and using activities they can socialise; you can see that they can talk to each other provided it is not disturbing other children.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Limpopo

The alternative respondents mentioned that they have scheduled free play sessions during the day (normally outside). Within the classroom and outside, play is viewed as a vehicle for learning. However, while they claim to reject formal work, they give the example of progressing to maths worksheets, which many would feel is not a play-based activity. On the play continuum, this could be located as playful instruction.

> *If they play, they learn; that's how we work. So, let's say if I've got the stringing beads in the class, and they need to put beads on and then I will give them a pattern like blue, red, blue, red and they will think it's a game "come, let's see who finishes blue, red first" and that's how… and then they learn the colours as well and it's fine motor because the beads are small. So that's how.*
>
> Alternative Practitioner

> *Yes, we are able to integrate play time into learning. This is done as much as possible, e.g. Mickey Maths – starts with games and progresses into a worksheet. Exercises to promote development are also play-based.*
>
> Alternative Practitioner

Teacher's role

There was no specific question about the role of the teacher in the interviews. However, there were numerous references to this, except for the mainstream pre-school respondents, of which only one commented on acting as a role model as an important aspect of the teacher's role.

> *Children learn to be like you, they see you, what kind of teacher you are, and they start to imitate you. So, I have to be the first one to be a role model to them, to be self-confident myself, positive attitude to them so that they can see, even if their parents don't behave like that.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

Waldorf and Montessori respondents often referred to the importance of the teacher as a role model and demonstrating tasks to be done.

Our children learn that through imitation, the teacher is a worthy role model. Learning happens in an environment that is stimulating with no hindrances.

Waldorf Manager, Western Cape

In the first developmental stage of the child, we work with imitation, so as guardians and caretakers, we must be in the position where we are imitable. Our approach is definitely one of being actively involved with the children that we represent a little household, and everything that happens is similar to a household: we wash dishes, we clean up, and the children are part of it. It's not an instructive kind of approach.

Waldorf Manager, Gauteng

The teacher is the role model…the way they dress is important, the way they speak is important, the way they teach is important because the children are going to copy them.

Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

Kids pick up from us. I always say to my assistants you must watch what you say, how you talk to them, you must always watch. Because whatever you do, they also do it. They copy very quickly; you'll be surprised how they do it. They copy so quickly, even the small ones. So that's why we're always more calm, we don't shout, our voices are gentle.

Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

In terms of the Montessori teacher's role, while there is an emphasis on children learning and gaining independence, respondents indicated that they take quite a strong instructional role within the frame of children selecting their own activities. Some practitioners reported being more directive than others.

In Montessori, the children make creative choices in their learning, while the classroom and the teacher offer age-appropriate activities to guide the process of the child making choices. We role-play a lot, for them to see and notice.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

By the end of the term, every single child will have covered everything that is in here. I am strict. If a child is not able to recognise the colours, you can't just say no and move on.

Montessori Manager, Gauteng

The older children will work with the younger child and you (the teacher) as the directress invite the child or children to participate in classroom activities.

Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

The Reggio Emilia practitioner's role is to support children as their interests direct the content of activities. As was explained:

Children are the ones that are coming up with this topic... we are more the facilitators in the child's learning, guiding them, walking alongside them, it's a partnership. And then it's valuing the voice of the child, we listen to the children and are guided by them, and not always coming in with a teacher-guided lesson. it's the flexibility of the teacher to be able to work with that emergent curriculum, what the child has brought in the classroom, what the children want [because] then they are [going to] learn so much better.

Reggio Emilia Manager, Eastern Cape

We are researchers with the children trying to find out information that we needed to supply the children with… also with the documentation, every school is different, but I find that the teacher is understanding what each child is thinking and learning.

Reggio Emilia Manager, Eastern Cape

There were a few comments on the teacher's role with the alternative approach respondents. Their dominant view, as shown in their critique of policy documents above, is that children need informality and freedom, and absence of formal instruction.

They choose what they want, but all the toys are according to the theme. So, each two weeks we change the theme and toys in the class to fit them, we don't have the same toys otherwise they're [going to] get bored easily. We change everything.

Alternative Practitioner

2.2.4 School-readiness

Interview question
• How do you prepare your three- and four-year-olds for Grade R? (Practitioner and Principal)

All respondents reported giving active attention to children's readiness for Grade R. They reported monitoring children for the development of particular competencies. Those mentioned cover a range of skills, with a strong focus on communication and early literacy, including preparation for writing, but also gross motor skills, memory and confidence. The question was variously framed and there was no specific focus on all the domains. What different practitioners reported has been assumed to reflect the domains they consider to be most important for readiness for school. Most responses covered several domains and are disaggregated in Figure 11. A spread of domains was reflected across all approaches.

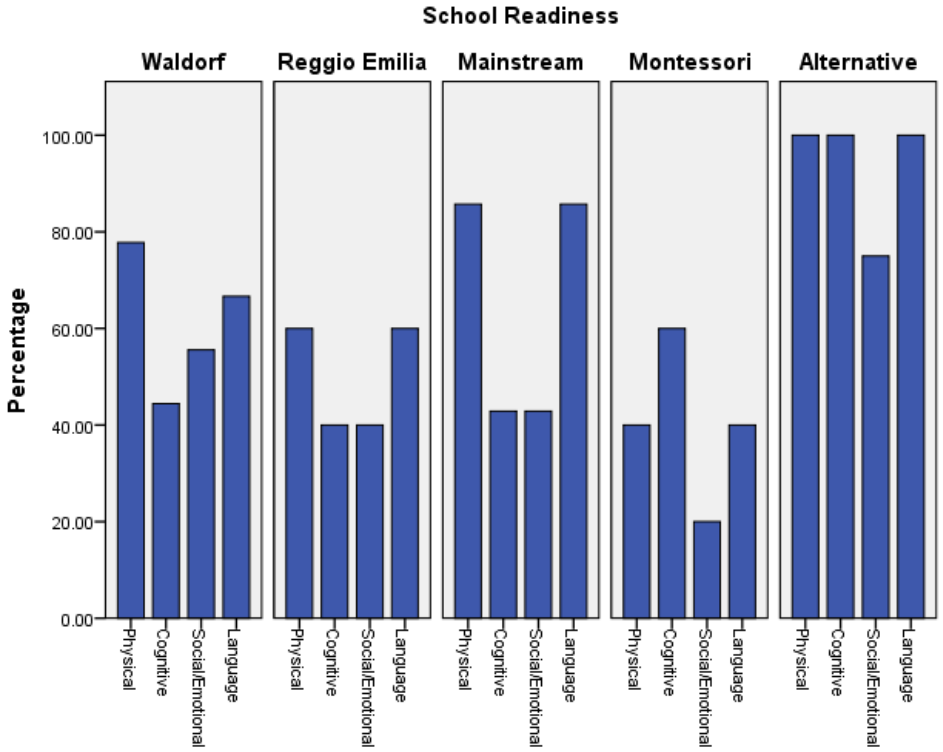

Figure 11: The focus of school preparation

Gross and fine motor skills

As shown in Figure 11, gross and fine motor skills ("physical" development in the figure) were most often mentioned, except in the Montessori approach. In the Waldorf approach, there is very strong emphasis on the physical readiness of the child to progress to the next stage of learning (including indicators such as loss of milk teeth, and gross and fine motor skills) as an indication of developmental maturity.

> *Firstly, we look at the body. As soon as a child's teeth start falling out it means his time for learning through imitation is over, then he starts getting ready to listen to [the] teacher, and to be more sorted behind his desk. We also look at capabilities, are they self-responsible, the body is probably the most important thing. I won't recommend putting a child through Grade 1 too quickly if he is not ready. So, it's a physical and a mental way of looking at things.*
>
> Waldorf Manager, Gauteng

> *We prepare them to grip the pencil hard. The scissor and mould(ing) clay. Is preparing fine motor skills….*
>
> Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Gauteng

> *Fine motor skills, the gross motor skills, the physical development – not reading.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Manager, Gauteng

> *…to hold a pencil, to cut, and paste.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Gauteng

The mainstream pre-schools also most often described fine and gross motor skills.

> *A learner going to Grade R can write their name. They can colour in, in the right place.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

> *They are big, so they must be able to jump, balance and walk. They must be able to cut and paste… Look at development …. small and big muscles, you know. They must hold a pencil, write their name, tie shoelaces, dress and undress, how to wash, paint and brush teeth.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

You can see in their ability to write; if they write or you ask them to draw something or a person you see if the learner is able to draw. Even if they are not perfect, you can see that they are trying, you look at the pencil grip... when we are outdoors, I look at the learner's balance, for instance if they are walking on the tyres.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

While Montessori respondents did not over-emphasise motor skills, they too provided examples:

In Life Skills they must be able to do the basic things like dress themselves, fasten their own shoelaces, take off their sweater, fold it up and put it in their own bag…

Montessori Manager, Gauteng

They must be able to colour in the lines and can pinch and thread.

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

The alternative approach also focused strongly on motor development:

How do I know my child is ready for school? Firstly, he must be able to be physically developed, healthy, so physically he must be able to hold his body up, and the big thing of development is to be able to keep your body still. Not just to move your body, but to keep your body still, you will be able to keep your body still….

Alternative Manager

Cognitive skills

Pre-academic cognitive skills were the most frequently mentioned domain by Montessori respondents, focusing on mathematics and numeracy skills, although they were also mentioned by most others, at times indicating that they would expect a child to exceed CAPS Grade R requirements:

…know the basic shapes, be able to at least recognise numbers from one to ten, count much further than that. I know they say if a child can build a puzzle of 30 pieces that's okay, for me that's not okay. What I usually try to achieve is to be able to build 60 pieces!

Montessori Manager, Gauteng

Maths outcomes: to count to a hundred and identify numbers to a hundred, some of them would be doing the group operations as well.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

The other approaches gave fewer cognitive domain examples, although there were some references to holistic assessment.

They must be able to recall what we have taught them.

Mainstream Practitioner, Limpopo

Intellectually he must be able to see something and know what to [do] without the teacher telling him ….

Alternative Manager

Social and emotional readiness

This domain was also stressed with a strong focus on confidence:

They must be independent, not shy.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Gauteng

First, the child is not afraid to speak to adults, he can speak clearly.

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

How they are independent, are they confident… I look in terms of have they got that self-discipline, self-motivation, are they able to focus, concentration is a big one.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

Socially, he must be able to handle frustrations, he must be able to handle outside conflict, he must be able to carry himself in an orderly way, so emotionally it is very important that he feels secure and safe… to express himself especially when he is able to speak up for himself and not be timid and withdrawn, emotionally it's like the last leg of this whole pot we are brewing that he feels he is competent in what he is doing even if he is not,… even if he doesn't fit in.

Alternative Manager

Language and communication

Mainstream respondents gave many examples of language and communication, while being clear that they would not expect formal reading and writing:

They are able to speak with comprehension.

Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

First, the child is not afraid to speak to adults, he can speak clearly.

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

They can identify their name on the chart even if they can't write it because we don't teach them to write here, we don't force them to be able to write their names.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

A learner going to Grade R can write their name and… recognise it even if they can't write it out in full. They are able to speak with comprehension… In that book corner a learner is able to read the story, because you have also been telling it in class, through the pictures like a child who can read. Here they learn even how to respect using a book instead of paging through it roughly and tearing pages.

Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

… and to be able to express himself, being able to follow the commands, understand the concepts of two or three or four instructions.

Alternative Manager

…and free to converse.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Gauteng

The Montessori schools encourage reading preparedness and early reading:

Read short phonetic words at least.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

When our children are in Grade R, when they go to Grade 1, they can already read.

Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

Good morning, say his name, and he must be able to do what is required in the CAPS document. Recognise some of the letters; be able to formulate this correctly.

Montessori Manager, Gauteng

There were also references by respondents at two Waldorf schools and the alternative approach to assessing the full spectrum of domains:

The child has to do this test, where she (a specialist) assesses whether … physically, emotionally, intellectually, the child is ready, and there are special things that he does in that assessment that he has to do. There is a very definite programme, that is followed for each child to be assessed before he goes to Grade R or Grade 0 or whatever.

Waldorf Manager, Eastern Cape

I take one child a week and look at their physical, social development, motor skills, language and speech development, independence (can they do stuff on their own). This goes to the kindergarten teacher to prepare them.

Waldorf Practitioner, Western Cape, 3- and 4-year-old group

We also have a School Sparks report. It is a report on Grade 1 readiness. It allows parents to gauge the gaps that exist as we prepare their child for Grade 1.

Alternative Practitioner

2.2.5 Daily schedule

Interview question
• Do you follow any daily schedule? How do you determine the daily activities? Are the days structured? Are they broken up into different classes or does one activity flow into the next? (Practitioner)

As is to be expected, all the respondents reported the use of a daily schedule, but the degree to which this was flexible varied as shown in Figure 12.

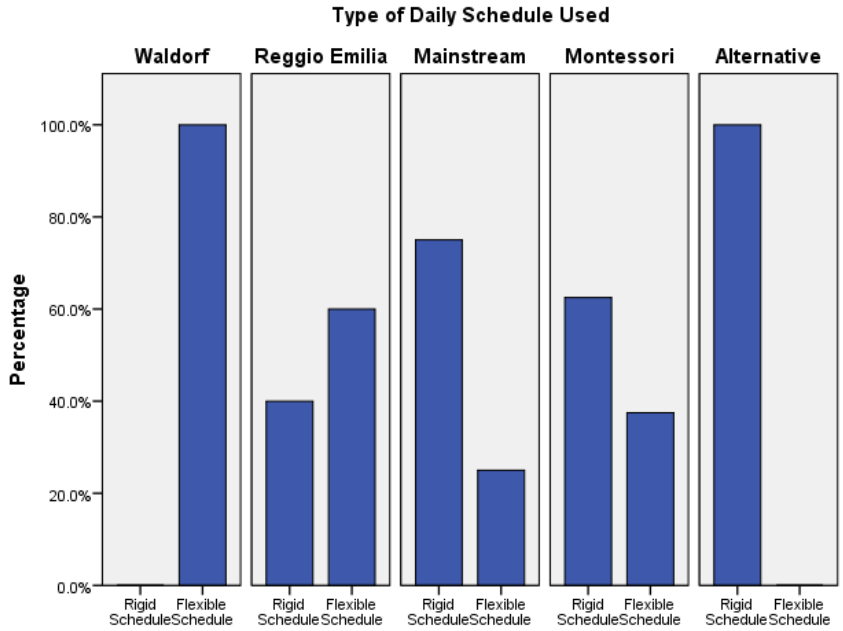

Figure 12: Types of daily schedules

Figure 12 presents two broad approaches to scheduling. The first is a structured schedule, where nearly the entire day is planned, and activities are planned. Flexible schedules, by contrast, may vary, both in the timing of activities, and in the choice of activities. Most of the curricula show a combination of these two approaches being used. However, Waldorf espouses an entirely flexible approach to scheduling, and the alternative model prefers a rigid schedule.

Waldorf respondents explained that the daily programme is to give children a sense of rhythm and time to their days, weeks, months and years. This means that there is a greater purpose to daily scheduling that requires Waldorf teachers to start and end activities naturally. This allows teachers to be flexible in their approach to their weeks. There is a schedule for the week, but the teacher is free to adjust it based on the needs and demands of the children or the environment. There is a balance of teacher-directed, more focused activities (breathing in) and freer child-directed play (breathing out).

> *Activities are broken up as per rhythm of the day. The younger children are still learning to socialise, to share, so they have different needs. The rhythm needs to be slightly different, so it's very much about finding their way during the day, with the teacher, with each other and the material. Whereas with kindergarten, it is a more structured day. The curriculum is also then more structured.*
>
> Waldorf Manager, Western Cape

> *Mondays – play dough; Tuesdays – drawing; Wednesdays – painting; Thursdays – baking; Fridays – sewing/crafts. We have the same rhythm every day, but I add more songs each week. Always adding something new so that they learn something new. Story telling gradually starts at five minutes and builds up to improve their concentration skills.*
>
> Waldorf Practitioner, Western Cape

> *We start with informal play and they can choose what they want to play with and sometimes we put blocks there just to stimulate something and they go from there and then we do morning circle. It's very relaxed and we try to be as patient, loving, good and kind as we can. It says Monday to Wednesday, then it's usually three things, so painting, or nature walk or Fridays tuckshop or dress up. So, we follow that baking, drawing it's very set, but if you see everyone is overly energetic then you maybe go for a nature walk and then do some drawing….*
>
> Waldorf Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Reggio Emilia's daily schedule of project time, singing, art, story and playtime is very flexible as children determine the activities.

> *Yes, we follow a daily schedule. We are not determining the daily activities. The days are not structured. The work can last a week. Today what I want is for them to learn sorting, colours, pattern, mixing and matching with the concept for example, colours. Yes, one activity can flow into the next level of activities.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Gauteng

Mainstream respondents reported following a regular daily schedule, some more flexibly than others, also depending on the age of the children. Activities within the routine are pre-planned according to themes, and several responses to this question talked to themes. The reported level of planning is higher than the author's own experience with practitioners in ECD centres.

> *Each teacher follow(s) a daily programme. Themes are changed each week. One activity does not necessarily flow into the next. Activities are broken up so there is balance between learning and play time before rest time. I decide what to use with the available resources I have in my class.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

> *Yes, we have [a daily programme]. Sometimes we do change certain things. We look at the schedule and decide on what we want to do for a day.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Limpopo

> *They already know the routine is in their minds. They know that after this we're [going to] do that one, and they also remind you – Missy, we're supposed to read our stories now – and you find out today there is a lot of "raas" (noise) and you can't do all those things and follow the daily programme. Then I say, "O, OK we're [going to] read, guys let's sit on the mat so that we can read". They remind me a lot; they follow the daily programme like very well.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

> *I mean, there isn't much that is happening with the babies, she doesn't even need to follow the daily programme because if they want to eat, they can eat, although the daily programme might not be saying its snack time. They can take a nap because they are still babies. It comes to be better with the toddlers; they need to have their theme….*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

> *"Yes, it [the schedule] does not change, it remains the same. Only the activities change for that particular day.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

Daily activities follow a pattern in all the Montessori pre-schools, although timing was flexible, depending on children's interests. The basic components described include settling in on arrival, which might be indoors or outdoors, a solid block of work time, circle time, story time, outdoor play and routines such as snack and toilet. Full-day programmes include lunch and rest. These activities are common to most ECD programmes, although some would call it work time, free choice activities.

Yes, I do. It's there on the wall. They basically do what they want to. I'm led by them or I will look at my file to determine which activity a specific child must do. One activity flows into the next.

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

07:30 – 08:30 that's like cool time as we let the children come in and settle time. So sometimes, we go outside, if its good weather, they play or if it's bad weather we create something in the class and let them play. and then we start class from 08:30 – 10:00. This is then work time, they can work. This time we do art, most of the times according to the theme, we have a theme every week. Circle time is every day; we sit and we sing and we count and we do weather board, what is the day today and all that stuff … And after that they sit for a snack and then there is a toilet routine also in the middle of it.

Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

It's flexible because we let them choose their activities during the cycle (work) time. They have the choice and the freedom. They want to feel like they are in control (within boundaries). The activities are sometimes extended, such as with the play dough, painting or the obstacle course.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

Then 08:00 – 10:15 it's theme and work time in the classroom. So then usually we start with the work time and then the theme. Then we have refreshments, and outside playtime. 11:30 – 12:00 they come in for story time; 12:00 – 12:45 we have lunchtime; between 12:00 and 13:00 it's home time for half-day children. 12:30 – 14:00 they must sleep and those that don't want to sleep must just lie down. Then 14:00 – 14:15 pack away mattresses and put on shoes; 14:15 refreshment time for the full-day children and then 14:50 – 17:00 its free play.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

The schedule of the alternative pre-school is much more fixed:

> *[The schedule] usually for the week is kind of strict. But, if there is like an extra activity or something that popped in which we didn't plan for, I then manipulate it to be able to do certain things we just minimise the time outside and then I will work it into the weekly planning.*
>
> Alternative Practitioner

> *In the two weeks we do all of those (SPICE areas, e.g. language, maths). So, let's say in the morning we start with free play outside; we go inside for toilet routine because most of them are still in nappies; then we go in class, we do the weather, we do the vocabulary that's the communication and all of those, we do fine motor and gross motor in class during the two weeks. We can do all of them. Thursdays we have Mickey maths, so all of the activities centre around maths.*
>
> Alternative Practitioner

2.2.6 Age- and stage-appropriate activities

Interview question
• How do you gauge whether the activities are appropriate for the children's development level? (Practitioner)

While all approaches considered the age appropriateness of activities for the children, there were differences in how systematically this was done.

Waldorf respondents observe children closely, but are informed by a detailed philosophy of age-appropriate development, which continues from birth through to senior schooling.

From our observation, the teacher and I will keep in mind the development stage and what the child is capable of doing and to what extent. The way they draw and hold a crayon gives me an indication. The children are free to choose their own activity. A lot of our activities is playing. There is no formal structure for an activity at this stage.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

Even within the same kinds of tasks, skills are graded. For example:

Because you can see … their development is not the same not their age, so you can see that this one can't do this. In the morning, we do sewing, we do weaving. So, the weaving is for the six-year-old, the sewing is for the 3–5-year-olds. Even the six-year-old can also do the sewing, but their sewing must be different from the small children. There are stitches that the 3-year-olds cannot do, like blanket stitching, but at six years old they can do it … the 3-5-year-old can do in and out.

Waldorf Practitioner, Eastern Cape

In Reggio Emilia-inspired and mainstream pre-schools, there seemed to be reliance on trial and error, observing how well children were coping with activities and on allowing the younger ones to learn from the older children.

However, Reggio Emilia respondents made two explicit references to developmental stage and milestones.

I monitor and watch them. The class is small enough for me to keep my eyes on each of them. If I see them getting frustrated with an activity, then I know that it's too difficult for them.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Western Cape

I look on the level of interest, the development stage as well and sometimes we (teacher and children) brainstorm.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Mainstream practitioners reported considering the age appropriateness of activities for the children under their care. Practitioners typically assess how well children are coping with the games and activities by observation alone. If a child appears to be frustrated, or struggling, practitioners will provide additional instruction or support.

I can't say that I depend to the age. I only depend to the time that I see that kids now they can use this, they can use that one.
Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

I just give them the activity and will see if they will be able to manage it.
Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

This (qualification) training has provided me with the skill to determine appropriate activities as per a child's age. Sometimes you find that since the learners are combined, a younger one might be interested to do what the older learners are doing.
Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

We all sit on the mat during lessons. Those who are behind learn from those who are fast learners. We teach them the same stuff. I always check those who can't speak and encourage them to listen to the elder children.
Mainstream Practitioner, Limpopo

Because an individualised approach underpins Montessori, children's readiness for the next level of activity is systematically noted in the daily records and responses emphasise the great care taken in assisting children with activities appropriate for them, building up from simpler to more complex tasks that are available. Due to vertical grouping, younger learners are observing older learners being exposed to material/activities that they may not be exposed to at that age.

Each learner gets their own lesson plan for the week. There is a very specific progression that we follow. We keep building onto what the child has previously mastered. So, we've got record keeping files and each child has got their own specific record keeping and then every week I plan what I want to do with that child for the week. And then I record, as soon as I finish a lesson through my observations, I record what they have done and what I would like to do next.
Montessori Manager, Limpopo

If I see the child has really acquired that skill and is ready to move on, I will again come to the child and suggest something on the level of the child. The first one may be a three-year-old and this [is] a five-year-old. I will again introduce to a five-year-old something that is appropriate for his age. And in the meantime, I am keeping an eye on this one. You usually have about eight or nine children. You are constantly observing what they are doing, and you are constantly representing if you see that a child is really battling and they can't get it right, you represent, you represent until the child has acquired the skill. If it is something that you are not going to get there, you speak to the parents.
Montessori Manager, Gauteng

Experience helps me here. When its activity time, I will guide those who are not ready towards an introductory activity… to build their confidence. They can and do surprise me sometimes. The children are free to choose their own activity. The activities are arranged systematically on the shelf. But if a weak child attempts a more advanced activity, I will leave them to try and try and then watch and go and assist them or suggest they try a similar, but easier activity. I will point to the shelf, and they can then choose their own activity. Those who are more advanced have the freedom to choose a more advanced activity.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

In the alternative programme, as with the Montessori programme, systematic developmental monitoring informs the choice of activities, although this also involves observation and trial and error.

We monitor the developmental milestones of the child and adapt.... The activity need(s) to fit with the child. If it's too difficult, we put in another activity that's a little bit easier. We can see if it's age-appropriate by them playing with it, but if it's too difficult it doesn't work; or if I can see that they are struggling with it I will give it to the stronger one to do it…. It is a trial-and-error system, but it works for us. We observe where the child is developmentally in conjunction to what they are working with.

Alternative Practitioner

2.2.7 Progress assessment

Interview questions

- In which way(s) do you assess "progress" of children at different ages? (Practitioner)
- Do you record the progress of learners? If so, how is recording and reporting done? (Principal)

Providing a programme that is sensitive to the holistic needs of each child is a key aspect of quality learning and teaching. It is also widely observed in the field that many mainstream practitioners do not know what to look for. This may be because there is insufficient time allocated to the topic of formative assessment in ECD training. In addition, the NCF assessment guidelines are very generally expressed with little differentiation across ages/stages. This occasioned the DBE/Unicef's commissioning of the development of assessment packs linked to the NCF.

Based on their observations, Waldorf teachers produce detailed written reports for every child, describing their personal development from a wide variety of perspectives. As with the practitioner's quote above, children's drawings are an important indicator of progress. Any written response or artwork is collected in a file, and observational checklists or assessments are used to track a child's development during the year. The parents then receive this final file, as well as the final report. Some schools simply send this home with the child at the end of the year, and others provide these reports more frequently, and include more direct engagement with parents.

We do assessments, and we do profile all their work, we have files for every child. So, all of the work they do week by week, day by day so it gets put in there and any parent can take a look at that, and then we do mid-year assessments for all of the children. The playgroup (for infants and toddlers) has [a] different one, the nursery school and the 3- to 4-year-olds have a different one…. At the end of the year, we do another assessment, to see the progress of the child coming in from the year before, to the middle of the year and to the end of the year, and we write them a beautiful report of the child.

Waldorf Manager, Gauteng

You watch how physically they are in the playground, and in the arts, you watch through drawing and painting because by the time he is six, he should be drawing a house, with a door and a chimney. And people with legs… or starting to. And if a child gets there, and you don't see any of that, well as it's going along, you think uh -oh, I must watch.

Waldorf Manager, Eastern Cape

Reporting is a process of communicating learners' performance via parent meetings, school visitation days, newsletters. Performance is measured via projects, portfolios, teacher observation, tests.

Waldorf Manager, Western Cape

Children in Reggio Emilia-inspired pre-schools are assessed on a continuous basis and this is closely connected to their practice of documentation. Observation and subsequent note-taking was the primary means of gauging and recording children's progress. Observations and photos (of drawings) are collected by the practitioners and stored in a portfolio, which is presented to parents at the end of the year. One school reported having a tool with outcomes to inform the continuous assessment, which is valuable for focusing practitioner attention on specific skills that are required.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Eastern Cape

When I go home, I make a little note on what I have observed. We have a file for each child and at the end of the week, I complete the profile and file it. We have regular feedback sessions with parents, and we point out children's strengths.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Eastern Cape

These parents get verbal reports from us in Term 1 and 3. We give them a photographic or a digital report in Term 2. And then in Term 4, they get a written report. Although we give verbal and digital/photographic reports, we still need to record everything in writing, and this is kept.

Reggio Emilia Manager, Eastern Cape

Observation work. We take their pictures for documentation. The documentations with notes are pasted up for parents to see. The work is kept in a flip file. The portfolio. This is given to parents at the end of the year.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Gauteng

One practitioner reported using body image drawings as an additional progress assessment:

… but also on a monthly basis, they draw a body image for me from January and you can see as the year goes down how it's progressed, I do assessments and observations.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Western Cape

In the mainstream pre-schools, almost all practitioners reported actively assessing their children. Observation and subsequent note taking was the primary means of gauging and recording children's progress. Children's work is kept in portfolios. Parents are usually provided with a half-year and end-of-year report. There were some references to use of checklists or templates. At one pre-school, the "draw-a-person" test is applied as an indicator of progress.

[The] teacher is the one who is assessing the children according to the daily observation, according to their craft. They collect all the information. It's during the morning ring, it's craft, it's outside play …

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

I believe to write it down, but now I am so glad that as I am a Grade R teacher, I now have pamphlets to write on and I will also be able to do some reports this year. It's my first time to do reports. So, I just write everything down in my observation book. If I want to start to do my reports, I'll just check the book.

Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

I have a checklist, which I tick on a Friday. Friday is admin day. The children play with toys while we do admin.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

[We] constantly observe. Yes, we do write the observations down even though it is not on a daily basis. We assess during the assessment period. The three- to four-year-olds write outside in their classroom, there is a teacher that assists with that and I remain with the 4- to 5-year-olds who can draw a proper picture of a person. Because the young ones can only draw a person's feet or head. So, from there when they see that the other is attempting [to do this], they move him or her to my class. We also look at their speech... during the morning ring as they share their news you are able to listen to a learner's speech, even when they are playing, we will engage them in conversation.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

The reports are done half-yearly and they go to the parents. We would like to get that to quarterly but now we've got it half yearly. The teacher makes rough notes every day from her observations.

Mainstream Manager, Gauteng

So, we do assess the learners almost daily and our reports are a compilation of those assessments.

Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

In Montessori pre-schools, as indicated in section 2.2.6, progress assessment is integral to ensuring that children receive age- and stage-appropriate activities. All respondents who mentioned progress assessments used observation notes or tick sheets. They are referred to every day to see if a child needs to progress to a more complex activity.

[We have] daily records and then there is what the teacher who worked with a group of five children for the day and what she presented to them. Then there is the accumulative record where they add what they have mastered, so there is always observation going on.

Montessori Manager, Western Cape

We have Montessori tick sheets (on the wall) on which we record our observation for mastery. We have age-appropriate report cards. These are sent to parents each term. Every day I communicate with parents....

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

We report to parents twice a year in June and December. So, the reports we write from the file. I record every day. I will look and record whether they know their colours, days of the week, months of the year, their name....

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Yes, I compile this also for the parents. It's not just for my own records. At the end of the term, we have parent reviews and then I know how to explain to them and I connect with them.

Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

The occupational therapy influence on the alternative programme means that each child is developmentally assessed at the beginning of the year, and then this is repeated at the end of the year using the Carla Grobler ECD checklist, which measures multiple developmental domains and maps them to age-related milestones. Activities are then done during the year and these are filed alongside the child's developmental assessments and observations. Two files are then presented to parents in June and December.

[We] monitor the developmental milestones of the child and adapt and use this to guide our planning for activities. It is a trial-and-error system, but it works for us. We observe where the child is developmentally in conjunction to what they are working with.

Alternative Practitioner

2.2.8 Special needs

Interview questions

- How do you support learners who are struggling? (barriers to learning)? (Practitioner)
- How does this school support learners who have academic, social, physical or emotional difficulties? (Principal)

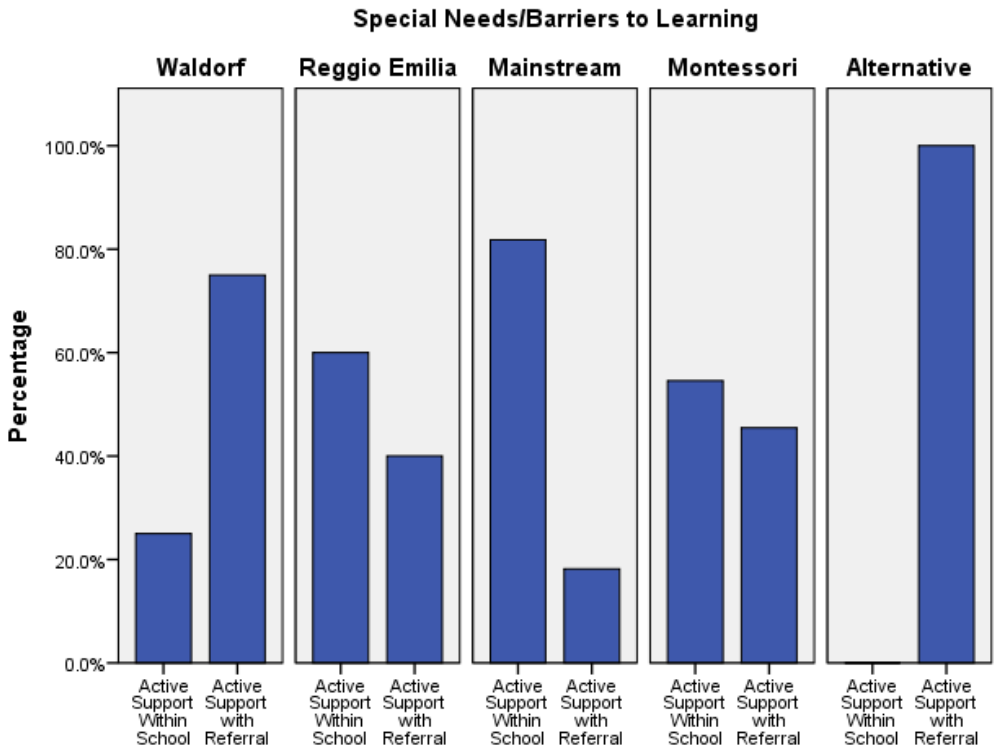

Figure 13: Approaches to special needs/barriers to learning

Education policy promotes inclusion and the special support of children with barriers to learning. Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education (DoE, 2001b) identifies many potential barriers to learning and development, including physical, mental, sensory, neurological and developmental impairments, psycho-social disturbances, differences in intellectual ability, particular life experiences or socio-economic deprivation, as well as lack of appropriately trained educators, assistive devices and other resources.

The Children's Act prioritises children with disabilities for early intervention and ECD services support. However, such children have limited overall access to ECD services, and appropriately trained practitioners have been identified as a scarce skill (ETDP SETA ECD Sector Skills Plans).

The response of the different approaches provides valuable insights. All curricula had a strategy, and Figure 14 indicates the extent to which the support provided was in-house and/or supported by referral to specialists. What is evident is that the mainstream pre-schools reported considerably less access to active support with referral. This is likely to be as a result of limited public special needs services and perhaps lack of understanding of when referral would be beneficial.

Responses to the questions vary from examples supporting children who have what might be seen as specific, but minor learning or social difficulties to strategies for dealing with children with mild to moderate disabilities.

Minor learning difficulties

For the minor learning difficulties, individual attention and working with parents to provide support with possible specialist referral was the strategy commonly employed across approaches, for example:

> *We do have a professional counsellor and she refers if the child needs extra help. But then we also have a very interesting other little method that is our little secret, and we call it child observation. So, if there is a child that is really not participating, not feeling well and not happy in our space, then we do a child observation, and it means everyone is involved, all of us together from the toddlers' group right through to all of us, myself included, we observe the child.*
>
> Waldorf Manager, Gauteng

Through observation, teachers are able to identify any kind of academic, social, physical or emotional challenges which may disturb learning. The teacher informs the parents. If necessary, the child is then referred for treatment to a physical or educational psychologist. Weekly meetings are held to provide feedback and offer further support to both the child and parent. We also have other remedial activities. These mostly happen with games/play. An occupational therapist visits the school to stimulate and promote development of the child.

Waldorf Manager, Limpopo

I do pull the parents in, quite a bit, so I do chat to the parents and say I am finding for example one of my little boys was having trouble, he is not interested in numbers – so he found just counting 1–5 (objects) was tricky, and he is going to Grade R next year.

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Eastern Cape

When the other children go for free play, I identify the ones who are struggling and remain with them. I take two of them. Sometimes they can't draw or cut. I say to them let the others go and play. Let us work. We give them individual attention. If it is still a challenge, we ask the parents to assist at home...

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

We keep on recording and recording until we see we are a bit worried that this child is already four and the child is not able to hold a pencil correctly, we know, not able to cut at a certain level… we know that we have to refer that child. Speak to the parents and get the child assessment and see [the] occupational therapist or speech therapist.

Montessori Manager, Gauteng

Our programme is set up in such a way that we can recognise the red flags. For the things that we can do, we do, behavioural things that we address, usually it's within the family and the school. But things above that like speech therapists and occupational therapists and where there is trauma in the house, we incorporate the outside professionals so that they come and support our need.

Alternative Manager

In one mainstream centre, a respondent noted child maltreatment or neglect as a barrier or special need.

Some of the barriers are if the child is not treated well at home, if the child is hungry or watching television for the whole night, it is easy for me to see that type of a child. Or others they are staying with parents in a shack, and they see everything that they are doing in that one shack at night… You have to be closer to that child, try to talk and play with that child a lot…We first report such children to the principal and the principal will do a home visit and try to talk with the parents.

Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

Severe barriers

For children with more severe barriers, the Waldorf, Montessori and alternative approach, as well as one of the Reggio Emilia-inspired facilities, are inclusive pre-schools, with the curriculum suited to a spectrum of needs and access to external specialist support.

I love this curriculum because it does not discriminate. Even a special needs child is catered for, so they don't feel excluded; they participate in the same activities as other learners even though differently. You know those children and you keep them close. You always find an activity that will require them to count so that they finally are able to grasp it. So that he doesn't remain behind. Even with the differently able-bodied learners, you must not make it obvious that they are struggling. So, as we are playing here, you focus more on an activity that you know will assist his development.

Waldorf Practitioner, Eastern Cape

The individualised Montessori approach is helpful for working with children with special needs and barriers to learning.

Normally, in a big class, where all the children are the same age and they all do the same thing, that (special needs) child will stand out. Even the children and the child himself will be aware. Here he is not aware of that and the other children are not aware of that because we just work with him without making a thing out of it. But we are very aware of where every child should be.

Montessori Manager, Gauteng

Montessori is open to all types of children, especially the autistic and the special needs. They are included.

Nevertheless, this manager noted that:

… the special needs children are a challenge, they're really a challenge.

Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

Well, Montessori is obviously inclusive education and obviously the children with the learning or special needs are not all on the same level. Some might need facilitators and some might not. In extreme cases where we can't, where we might need to train staff, we might decline but we hardly ever do.

Montessori Manager, Western Cape

We have made a decision to be an inclusive school, so we will take children with special rights [sic], learning, or any kind of learning challenges. We have kept the percentage in class manageable, but we have Asperger's children, we have an autistic child, we have children with severe ADHD. How we do it is I think by seeing the child differently, and we work on the strengths of those children, to make them feel valued, we don't label them, they are part of the classroom and yes, maybe they might do things differently… so we just provide tools and ways where we can help the children in those problems. We also have an occupational therapist and a speech therapist that work with us and a play therapist…

Reggio Emilia Manager, Eastern Cape

Several mainstream centres also enrol children with disabilities. Most respondents reported giving active support to children with difficulties and involving parents, with many also referring children to a specialist for further evaluation. Despite the provision of support, some respondents expressed that did not feel they could adequately meet the needs of disabled children due to insufficient resources and training.

We refer children with serious learning disabilities because we don't have resources. But I have done the course on how to help children, it was long time ago so it changes all the time, but obvious[ly] you cannot say to the parent after having taken the child that you can no longer look after them because you do not have resources. You need to find a way, do research to deal with the child.

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

We've got a case here of a child that is autistic. The parents deny it, but the child don't interact and last week we had an intervention here. A specialist psychologist and two colleagues measured him in a group activity, you know, to see how he interacts; but he will walk out and those type of things. So, it's very difficult, you know. So, I said to the principal "It's not in his interest and in the school nobody benefits by having the child here, if we cannot give him a proper care", you know, specialised care…. You need a special class for them and we don't have the facilities here as yet.

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

We have such a learner, she cannot walk or talk, she is disabled. She is five years old; she wears a diaper and sometimes she can cause a disturbance in the class. But she does understand when you reprimand her to keep quiet, you will find her going quiet, smiling and looking down. The other learners are also used to her and know that they need to be careful and not step on her. When the other learners are writing we give [her] a crayon and paper. She then scribbles on it, whichever way she wants. With the toys she likes the building blocks, you will find her putting them together to build this high hill. Since she cannot talk, but she can hear the other learners calling the teacher "Miss" and you would find her stammering trying to say the same. There are also songs she tries to sing or sometimes you would find her trying to action them.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

We do take in differently abled learners and try to develop them. Because by them coming to school they will gain something compared to them sitting at home and being babysat by their grandparents. Here you can give them a crayon to scribble and by doing this you work on their muscle development. Maybe they can't even speak, but by hearing other learners speak, they will slowly learn a few words. So, we don't discriminate against differently able(d)children, we try to include them although we don't have the necessary facilities to cater for them.

Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

2.2.9 Resources and materials

Interview question

- Which material/resources are important for your lessons (for teaching)? (Practitioner)

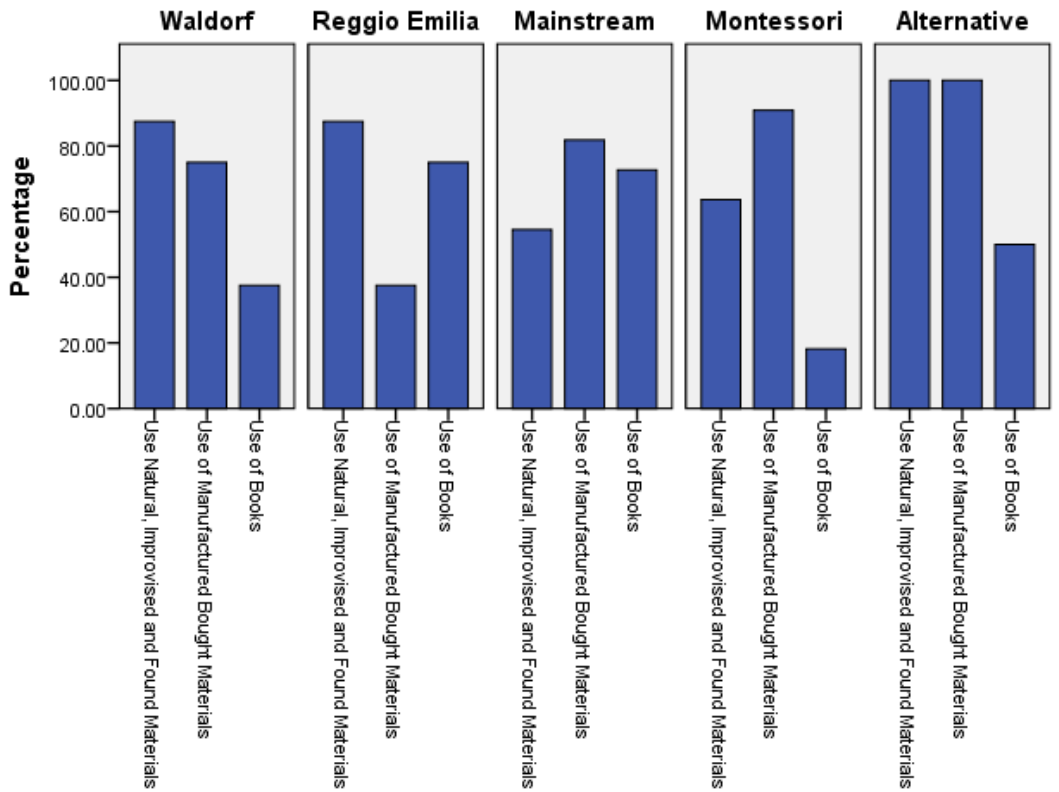

Figure 14: Types of resources and materials used

Figure 14 shows the most common materials available to be used by practitioners. The use of books includes the child or practitioner using an age-appropriate book. Manufactured or bought materials include man-made toys of various types. Natural, improvised and found materials are those everyday objects used in creative ways for play or learning.

Waldorf respondents indicated that only simple and natural materials are used as toys. This means that objects found outside could be used as play material, or if a more formal toy is used, such as a set of blocks, it is generally meant to be hand-made, and made only of natural materials. The aim of this is to spark imagination.

> *Our toys are simple, we have sticks and bones and little shells and with that they make their own game they make their own toy.*
> Waldorf Manager, Gauteng

> *We use natural, wooden material. We even use grass, stones, leaves, twigs. These are things the children collect and bring to class and we make up a lesson around the things, depending on what our theme is.*
> Waldorf Practitioner, Western Cape

> *The blocks, we're using natural stuff, silk material, we make toys we don't buy them, we don't use plastic we use natural [material]. So that when you feel that doll, they feel like a real person. So, we don't put smiles on the doll because the children must use their own imagination, maybe today he is sad or crying and they say that about the doll they're playing with…. Like crayons must be there, different colours and we have beeswax so when they mould like clay dough, we have a day for beeswax.*
> Waldorf Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Books were specifically mentioned, but for picture reading.

> *Books are just for pictures, not for reading. We do not read stories from a book. Stories are taught and enacted.*
> Waldorf Practitioner, Limpopo

Like the Waldorf approach, the Reggio Emilia-inspired pre-schools prefer to use natural or found learning materials to encourage children's imagination. This often involved the use of everyday objects, which can typically be found in the home or in the garden.

> *Natural resources, e.g. stones, studs, bottle caps in different colours and sizes and shapes. Leaves and ice cream sticks.*
> Reggio Emelio Practitioner, Gauteng

I like about Reggio that there is a move toward more natural things, making use of stones and feathers and moving away from the sort of plastic, but working with nature. Open ended, planks, loose pipes …a collection of stones, a collection of… shells… we use a lot of natural stuff, and we do a lot of recycling.

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Western Cape

However, the classes also use paints, dough and crayons…

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Gauteng

… puzzles, drawing materials, building blocks, a projector for shadow work and things such as a magnifying glass to explore found material such as insects.

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Many mainstream respondents reported having both home-made/natural and store-bought toys, art materials and books. It was noted during the observations that many of the varied learning resources were not in use. There was less emphasis on natural or found material than for the Waldorf, Reggio Emilia and alternative approaches. Mainstream pre-schools are often short of finance and greater use of found and natural materials would allow them to offer a wider range of play experiences.

Starting with your educational toys, building blocks, even fantasy play and the resources for the outdoors.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

We have different toys for different themes, we have different shapes, cars, stones, fruit and vegetable toys. Resources for art activities need to be there.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

There are story books that we received when I('m) attending forums. Sometimes we read them.

Mainstream Practitioner, Limpopo

(I) collect some recycled materials. (Also have) books, puzzles.

Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

As well as standard ECD equipment like books and puzzles, there are specific Montessori materials to help children learn maths, sensory discrimination and language, etc. Many of these are wooden. These can be sourced via SAMA. A feature of these is that they are carefully graded and many of the materials for younger children are self-correcting. Respondents reported supplementing with other equipment, household objects such as jugs for pouring, lentils for transferring with tongs to another container and recycled materials.

> *Like in the 3–6-year-olds, in Montessori, the equipment they're in stages. Like you'll start in sensorial it will be colour box 1, which contains three colours (green, blue, yellow); once they've mastered that it goes to another colour, colour box 2, which has got 12 colours in it; once they've mastered that they go to colour box 3, which is 12 colours but shading, it goes from light to dark. With maths also, before we can introduce numbers to them, we will start sorting the beads – they put them in allocated things with different colours. If they can master that we teach them numbers; from there we start matching the numbers with quantities.*
>
> Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

> *The equipment is specifically designed. There is a very specific way that you present an activity because you're aware of what the aim is, what am I preparing this child for.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Limpopo

> *Although learning is self-directed, error is controlled by self-correcting materials… (For example) the pink tower where they build and build and build, it won't go up until it is done properly.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

The alternative pre-school uses a variety of different materials. These include blocks, boxes, paper, water, cement, sand, pictures, sound boxes, writing materials, puzzles, toys, computers, toys, books, and anything else that facilitates sensory stimulation. Two practitioners reflected on the use of the interactive white board.

> *Depending on the ages… I think the most important thing we need is material for sensory integration. So, the sensory integration you use pictures, you use sound boxes… Each kid gets a picture they must describe – it's black, it's white, it has dots, it's round. Then to picture it in their mind. And the other kids ask them questions. Then objects are also fine.*
>
> Alternative Practitioner

We use the interactive white boards for the child to experience learning, the lesson is visual, and the child stands vertically, which encourages good posture, and the child is able to explore learning at their own pace. We also use worksheets, puzzles, toys, computers, educational games, natural materials, sand, water, stones, branches and twigs.

Alternative Practitioner

A note on the Early Learning and Development Areas

Although this was not directly questioned, we decided to code it to see whether all ELDAs were reflected by practitioners applying different approaches. Given that the NCF is a broad guideline informed by development principles, one would expect that these would be covered to some extent, even if the approach did not deliberately follow the NCF. That a particular ELDA was not mentioned does not necessarily mean that it is not addressed.

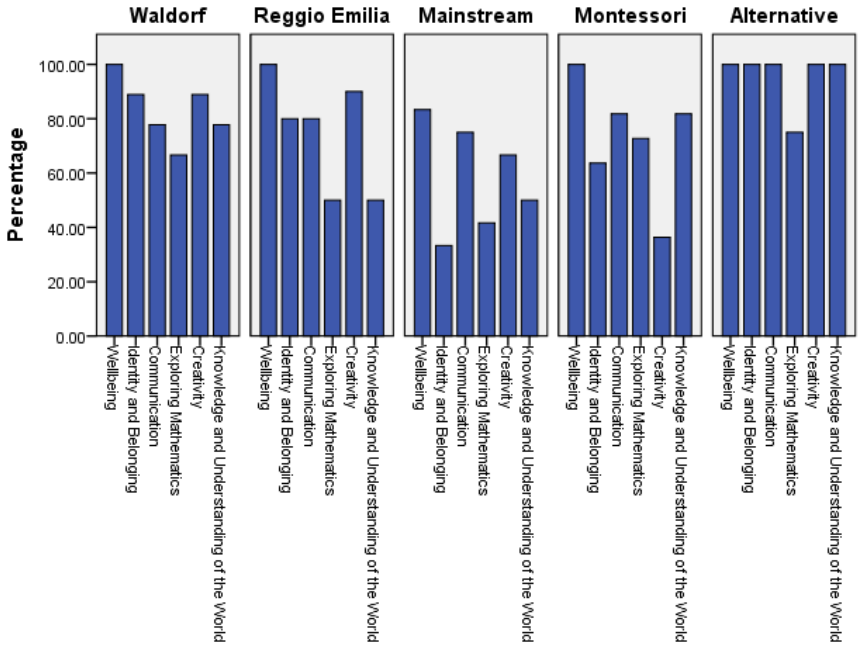

Figure 15: ELDAs mentioned by approach

Despite widespread lack of familiarity with the NCF, practitioners in all approaches touched on all the ELDAs. However, the non-mainstream respondents gave more examples of the ELDAS covered in their practice than the mainstream practitioners. This may well reflect gaps in training and the ability of practitioners to articulate their practice. The Waldorf, Reggio Emilia and alternative approaches have a much more conscious focus on creativity than either the Montessori or mainstream practitioners reported. The mainstream pre-schools also had relatively few responses concerning identity and belonging – social and emotional development.

2.3 Teaching strategies (pedagogy)

This overarching theme refers to actual teaching practices regarding grouping, behaviour management, language use and encouraging participation.

2.3.1 Learning through exploration

Interview question
• How do you encourage the children to learn through exploring?(Practitioner)

The meaning of this question was perhaps not sufficiently clear, and responses were limited. Those highlight different understandings of the role of the environment and practitioner in encouraging exploration. Across approaches, there were references to the senses and the outdoor, as well as the indoor environment.

Reggio Emilia practitioners emphasised their role in providing an interesting and varied environment to encourage learning through exploration.

Whatever they feel like doing, they must feel free to be able to do it. So, I also strategically place learning material and resources for easy access and multiple learning opportunities. So, you see like the projector is next to the drawers. So, they can get their own things from the drawer and place it on the projector.

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Western Cape

They must explore, they must touch… that is the most important way a child can understand something; because when they are playing with it and touching it, they will be wondering what is happening? What is what? By having things that arouse interest and tools to explore these (e.g. magnifying glass to look at insects they have found).

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Respondents linked play and exploration, which some practitioners then scaffolded. For example:

The activities we have are chosen for stimulation and exploring through play. I encourage and push them to go further, to build higher towers, to thread more beads, to make more shapes with the dough etc.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

I push them to be more interested. To be curious. I ask them why, show how and what happened.

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Mainstream respondents commented:

We do free play. We just look at them as they play.

Mainstream Practitioner, Limpopo

or

In the fantasy corner.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

However, the Montessori approach is a guided exploration in that the correct way to do an activity is demonstrated:

The child is free to choose the work they want to work with, but I have to have shown them how to do it first. They can't just choose something and work with it the way that they want to. They need to have a lesson first; they need to work the appropriate way.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

The outdoors was seen by all approaches as providing opportunities for exploration:

The children touch, hear, feel and smell with the elements of nature.

Waldorf Practitioner, Limpopo

[They] explore every day. They can go and climb and run and jump and touch their feet, I don't know. I think it would be difficult if you don't have space, but we are fortunate enough to have some space. We have our veggie garden and they plant and pick up herbs.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

During summer we take them outside, they learn how plants are formed, the colours of the leaves, and also when the leaves change colour when it's yellow and starts falling, and then there will no longer be Mr Sun….

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

The outdoor [is an] extension to teaching and learning. Learning doesn't stop when they go outside, and learning is not limited to the classroom.

Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

Okay, like when we do projects let's say we're doing a tree project then I'll draw them a tree with the branches and everything, then they must go outside and find some leaves and twigs and maybe outside they find feathers, because the birds make nests, so they get more excited. So, they can go outside and explore.

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

The children play outside before school and during school. We have a range of activities. The children are exposed to books, painting and nature. They lift rocks and rearrange stones and create gardens. They dig holes in the ground. They bake from a recipe. They are encouraged to use their senses.

Alternative Practitioner

2.3.2 Language in learning and teaching

Interview question

- How do you deal with the issue of language in teaching and learning? (Practitioner)

Across all the approaches, English (in one pre-school Afrikaans was also used) was the language of learning and teaching, except for two rural mainstream schools that used the vernacular. This was due to diverse enrolments in urban mainstream schools and the demand from parents for children to learn English, even in remote rural areas. Many practitioners were unfamiliar with or had limited knowledge of other local languages. This limited the ability of staff to assist even if, as is the case in Waldorf education, there was recognition of the importance of consolidating home language in teaching. Staff development at two of the Waldorf schools included language lessons to help with this. There were many reports of using local language explanations for children who did not understand, often through teacher assistants, or even with gestures, as shown in Figure 16. However, the impression from the transcripts is that this was ad-hoc/translanguaging rather than a formal code-switching process.

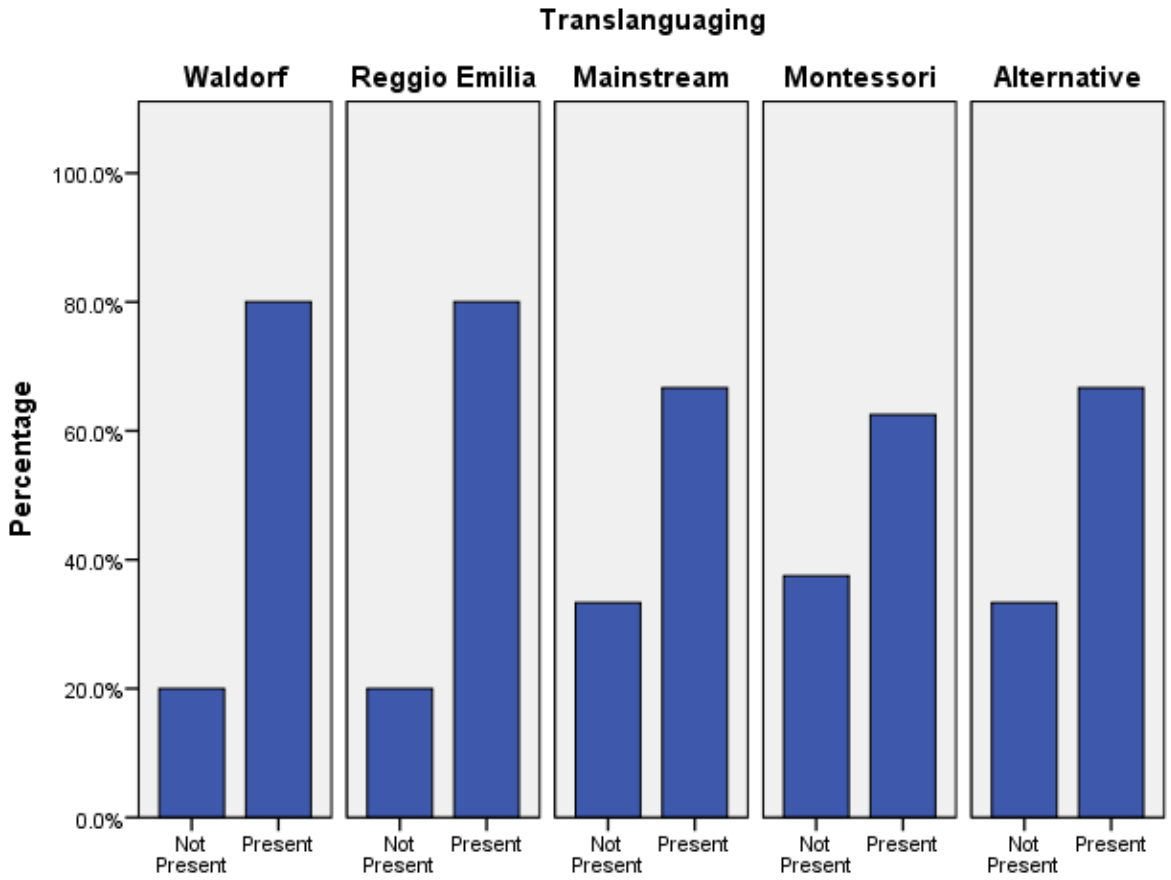

Figure 16: Translanguaging

I use a lot of gestures, even during story time. This helps with the foreign children. Every child speaks a different language and I use gestures a lot. Through play is also another method.

Waldorf Practitioner, Western Cape

I speak to them in the language they are comfortable in. English, Afrikaans, Sotho. Whatever their language is. They are definitely more responsive if I speak to them in their home language. It seems to build their confidence. If they don't want to reply with words, I allow them to use actions or point to something they want to do.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

Usually we use English on teaching, but if a child is not understand[ing], we can use his/her language. Which is Sepedi, Sotho or Venda. We do have Nigerian children. The children learn from each other. We have a Shona teacher, and we ask the teacher for help.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Gauteng

We teach in English and we mix it up with isiXhosa because others are foreigners and don't know Xhosa. Yes, we use English and we also learn some Malawian or Shona words, all those languages. I am glad to have that in my class because they teach me also that language. So that I can also talk to their parents because the parents become so glad when I greet them in their own language. So, yah we use English a lot, but there are times I speak Xhosa.

Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

It's a mix because you have learners that speak Sesotho, isiZulu. But we do use English, most of the time. However, where needed we do code-switch to the home languages. So, when I read to them I do so in English and translate to a home language, even when I give them instructions. For instance: "Sit down" then "hlalani phantsi" in isiZulu.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

But at school we only speak English. Using Afrikaans at home and just English at school is beneficial and avoids mixing.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

We use signs and code switch between English and Afrikaans. The teacher assistant will speak Sotho or Sepedi.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

I code switch between English and Afrikaans. If I don't know the language, I will ask my assistant, Antonio, is still learning English, so I mostly speak Afrikaans to him, but he is understanding.

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

In the beginning some of the kids come to school and have no idea how to talk English. And then we do talk in Sepedi sometime, I know a bit of Sepedi and I will just focus on sitting next to them all the time I think if you do repetition all the time, they get used to it. In the second term they know how to speak.

Alternative Practitioner

Several practitioners spoke of the challenge of learners with different home languages:

One of my main issues at the moment is language, but it's not a big concern to me. You see like Jade, she just started here the other month. She is the only girl in the class, she is Chinese… long story how she got here. Jade had to learn to play, to walk, to talk, to feed herself, to laugh, and much more.

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Western Cape

They don't speak English at all. Maybe they speak French, Spanish and they're from overseas so for them to adapt to English is difficult.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

Children who doesn't understand English. Because some of them only talk Sepedi and when they come here with no English background nothing…. In the class, there is one child … I keep him by my side or when he plays … the others talk English to him, … but we told the parents that one person at home must speak English with him.

Alternative Practitioner

One of the Montessori schools offers English and Afrikaans as LoLT. However, it focuses on separating the children for home language instruction at group times.

So, we're bilingual, Afrikaans and English, like you can see with our theme (time) we split them up. When we work in the class, dependent on who you are busy with you either talk to them in English or Afrikaans. But I mean, when they play outside it's English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, everything altogether. I promise you our Afrikaans children they speak Sotho or Zulu, I don't even know if they know what they are saying, but they are speaking.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

There were two references to introducing other languages informally:

The language is English, but not if a child does not understand. Sometimes we are making the songs of Sotho, the songs of Zulu, it's not English only, the child is learning that when I'm saying a frog it's a …. (Sotho name).

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Gauteng

IsiXhosa. We rarely use English, but when we do, it's mostly around counting, days of the week, instructions such as stand up or sit down. Just easy words.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

2.3.3 Encouraging confidence and participation

Interview question

- How do you encourage learner participation in the classroom? (explanation) – confidence (Practitioner)

This was a very general question and elicited a range of responses. There were several comments on encouraging and not forcing children to do things that they do not want to do. In addition, having a range of interesting activities was seen as useful. More direct strategies commonly mentioned across approaches included individual engagement with children, modelling/participating in an activity with a child or asking others to play with them.

I don't force them to do anything, but they watch what I do, and they decide to do it. There are boundaries in place for them.

Waldorf Practitioner, Western Cape

We don't force any child. But I will try and persuade to make them feel included. I will ask their friend to invite them to join in. I encourage social habits.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

If I notice that they are not really participating or engaging, then I will gently go and encourage them. So, based on those who doesn't like reading, that's where I am going to emphasise it so "Come on, come on and read with me, come tell me what you see in this picture".

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Gauteng

[I] encourage them to do a complete task and accomplish it to the end. Even if it's not good, I be patient and encourage them. One by one. See here at my table. I say they will get a star. They love stars. I talk and show love to the children.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

There are maybe two out of the class that are more quiet. But there are times that they participate, and I also encourage them and tell them to play with the others. From there you can see they start to relax. Sometimes it seems that unless you tell them, they won't play.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

Firstly, as an ECD teacher, you don't just sit and watch if they are playing, you also take part in what they are doing. You lie on the carpet with them and join as they do their puzzles. It is here that you find that even the shy one will draw closer and also participate. Sometimes you find that some children are drawn easily when they see an adult participate.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Mixed age grouping where older children support younger ones or pairing a stronger with a weaker learner was seen as useful for encouraging participation and developing confidence.

They are encouraged to do free play. There are the younger ones who will follow the lead of the older ones. These normally become partner/peer learning.

Waldorf Practitioner, Limpopo

I encourage them to do little things like make their own sandwiches, set the table, cut their own fruit and wash their own dishes. The older child is encouraged to take a younger child under his/her wing (takes the role of teacher) in table activities. The younger child loves to imitate what the older is doing, and learning happens best in this time.

Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

Yes, we place a weak child with a stronger child, especially with new activities. There is peer teaching because the children prefer to listen to each other with respect.

Alternative Practitioner

2.3.4 Partner/small-group collaboration

Interview question

- Do you provide opportunities for partner or small-group collaborative work? Describe how you are able to, if you do. (Practitioner)

All approaches reported opportunities for individual or small-group work, depending on the activity, although there was a stronger individual focus in the Montessori and the alternative approaches. There were several responses that group work helps weaker children learn from stronger children.

> *The children can play or do any activity once they arrive in the class. Some will play with their friend; others prefer to play by themselves.… You will see they enjoy playing on their own. We very seldom have activities or games that require one child to do it.*
>
> Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

> *We put out the table and put the papers on it and each learner will go and get their own paper. We normally have three working stations, and the learners will move between them. When we have the play dough out, normally they work together. So [it's] dependent on the activity. Even when they are doing individual activities it does not keep them from interacting with one another.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

> *It's like with the building blocks, I can ask them to build a house and ask them to do that in groups. With the others I can ask them to build an aeroplane, and from there I can see how they work together.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

> *So, they can choose to work on their own or they can choose to work with a friend. … A lot of the time the children observe somebody else. [A] lot of our boys especially work closely together with building things and there is a lot of teamwork going on there.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Limpopo

We usually work on an individual basis mostly with the children. We do small groups, for instance like I did with the Grade R this morning. We do group work as well.

Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

So, we do have mostly individual, but sometimes I include group activities and they must work together.

Alternative Practitioner

In the context of the vertical grouping, small-group work is also useful for dealing with different levels of children such as has been mentioned in the case of Grade R children.

Sometimes we do group work. Like if we do projects so then I'll maybe take the more advanced one then they get the more advanced project and then they work together.

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

2.3.5 Handling inappropriate behaviour

Interview question
• How do you handle inappropriate behavior in the classroom? (Practitioner)

Appropriate behaviour management facilitates the development of pro-social skills and self-regulation aspects of executive functioning, which is critical for success at school. In addition, the Children's Act's Norms and Standards for Partial Care and ECD Programmes prohibit harsh discipline of any kind.

Generally, across curricula, respondents reported having an active approach to managing inappropriate behaviour and were well aware that harsh discipline was unacceptable. Strategies included trying to understand the cause of the behaviour so that it can be addressed, taking children aside to talk to them, addressing the topic indirectly at group time through stories, diversion.

Figure 17 shows the common strategies to handle inappropriate behaviour.

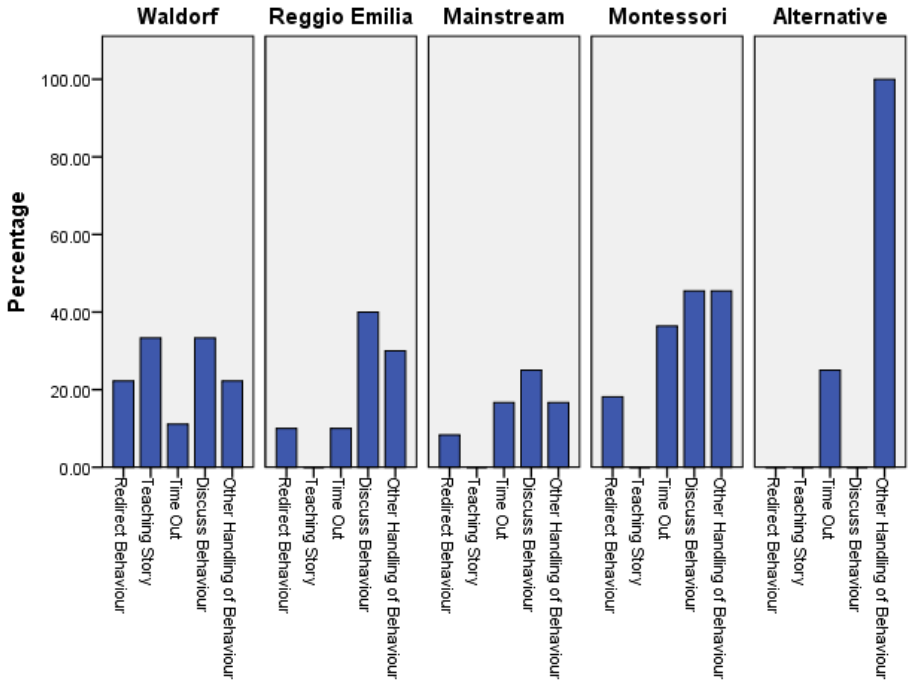

Figure 17: Strategies to handle inappropriate behaviour

As seen in Figure 17, five distinct categories of behavioural management were identified. Redirecting behaviour involves the direction of the child from a situation where there was conflict to another activity. Teaching stories presents a situation involving undesirable behaviour to teach the child to understand their behaviour and choose a better way to handle things. Time out involves separating the child from others and requiring them to remain inactive for a period of time. Discussion of behaviour requires the practitioner to engage the child in reasoned exploration of the undesirable behaviour to engage the child in developing an alternative response. Other ways of handling inappropriate behaviour includes any other strategy that does not fit with the others.

Key Waldorf strategies for managing behaviour were to discuss it or tell stories about it at morning ring. In addition, they use diversion, close contact and other positive discipline strategies, depending on what the child may need.

I use a lot of healing stories to deal with the issue at hand.

Waldorf Practitioner, Western Cape

But if someone misbehaves, I will remove the child from the space for a short while. I will make up a story of the incident and then I will get the children to act out the incident in circle time. I will improvise and use dolls, a chair, a truck and puppets. I also use negating and conflict skills to resolve an issue between two children.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

We don't have a naughty corner here. If the child is doing something that disturbs other children, you find a way to take that child from that situation. Maybe create a play (activity) so that he can be away from the group, you don't say "There is the naughty corner, go and sit there". Sometimes I find another way where a task I know they enjoy, and I ask the learner to do it. So, they quickly forget the mischief and get involved in that task.

Waldorf Practitioner, Eastern Cape

There is no specific Reggio Emilia approach to discipline, although, in keeping with child agency, there is discussion with children to resolve the issue. Separating the child from the group for a brief period, redirection to another activity and conversation were common disciplinary approaches reported by practitioners.

Look, our approach to discipline in general is always to stop the children, to redirect the behaviour, or to chat about why, what's the problem, what can we do differently, but if it's something probably once, twice, the third time again then we will probably have them to ourselves, you know I will remove them from the situation and make them sit next to me or just have a little bit of quiet time, talk about it, what happened and send them back to play.

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Western Cape

With Reggio it's all about talking. Keep calm and talk. Because I am asking why are you being like this; what happened; what make[s] you to be like this? Something happened. What happened? Listen to both sides.

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Gauteng

The child must never be humiliated or feel like he has done something wrong… We have a clean paper that we write the names of the children who do good things and also those who do bad, e.g. if a child can say I deliberately kicked your construction, then I will write Agnes deliberately kicked the construction, but that doesn't mean your name will stay there for ever, if you do something good then your name will be removed.

Reggio Emilio Practitioner, Eastern Cape

A discipline-related challenge noted by a Reggio Emilia principal concerns the agency of the child and cultural norms about adult roles and respect:

…the children are very used to having their own opinion, but sometimes when we go to the outside environment where there is a teacher that says "You sit still" … they also have to cope with that… I think that has been our biggest challenge to teach our children that value of respect for adults, and whilst we value your voice, there is a time that you also need to respect the boundary of the environment.

Reggio Emilio Manager, Eastern Cape

Mainstream respondents reported a variety of strategies:

We had a disciplinary for a teacher that somebody said she hit a child. … it's also a message I sent to the entire staff. Here, you don't touch a child. I will debar you from the system…. But what forms of discipline. So … when I interview them, I say: "How do you discipline a child", you know. Teachers tell me go stand in the corner, I say "No, no, no, that don't work in this place, this is not a corner place. You can't send a child to go stand in the corner." So, they must have interventions and skills to deal with something.

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

If a child misbehaves, we send the child to the principal. This is the rule. No child must stand outside the classroom.

Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

For example, if I am telling a story so they are sitting there, and you find that there is one poking the others I will now change the story and not talk about Cinderella, but use the misbehaving learner's name. The minute you mention their name, they will get shocked and pay attention. Instead of me screaming at him and disturbing the class… (If they fight) I call them both and ask them what happened and if it involves taking turns with a toy, I ask them to wait for the other to finish before taking it.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Montessori focuses on developing the child's self-discipline and does not apply rewards and punishment:

It's more about instilling that sense of doing the right thing because it's the right thing to do and not because they're going to get punished or get a reward for it. It's in a sense of just doing the right thing.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

Children are taught respectful ways to get attention, for example patting someone to tell them that they want to address them.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

… or use a "talking stick". If you want to talk, you carry it to the person.

Montessori Practitioner, Western Cape

In the event that there is a disagreement, this is discussed, for example: "I will call them aside and sit them down and talk calmly to them. I ask: "What did you do wrong?" And then I tell them it's wrong. They will accept responsibility for what they do wrong.

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

…or a child may be redirected: I will separate the child and let him/her sit alone with a book.

Montessori Practitioner, Limpopo

Respondents were divided on the use of time out, which is discouraged by the SAMA, which has a clear position that harsh discipline is not allowed:

So, we obviously don't punish, we don't smack, we don't even do the time out thing anymore.

Montessori Manager, Western Cape

However, several Montessori respondents talked about time out for severe transgressions:

If the behaviour persists, then the child is put in time out. This is not for punishment, but to get them out of the situation to reflect and become calm. The time out is age-appropriate, so for this class it will be 1–3 minutes.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

Yes, there are times when you get a learner who does not want to listen at all. We do have a punishment for such, the noticeboard. They will stand in front of the wall, the length of time dependent on his age. If he is three, he will stand there for three minutes, if four years, then four minutes. After that he can come back and apologise.

Mainstream Practitioner, Eastern Cape

One new and untrained Waldorf practitioner also reported using time out:

Sometimes you have to ask them repeatedly or remind them: "Please stop, this is not good behaviour" and ultimately if the child does not want to respond you maybe say: "There is a quiet corner, go and sit down".

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

The alternative pre-school applies a formal behaviour modification system as the principal does not believe that time out works:

Time out is not working so time out for time out.

Alternative Manager

Colour-coded cards are used to track good behaviour, minor offenses or serious offences. A blue card is punched if the child behaves well for the day and there is a reward for a full card of blue stamps. Depending on the severity of the offence, the child may be reprimanded, given a time out, sent to the office to complete the "lovies" and "grouchies" book, or their parents or another expert may be called (such as an occupational therapist). The "lovies" and "grouchies" system builds emotional literacy and requires them to choose whether the action was good or bad, how they and the other persons feel about the action, and how they can make it better.

We address inappropriate behaviour depending on the severity and different levels. If the incident is serious, we will call in the parents. We also send a letter to parents if the child has misbehaved. If the incident is serious and needs intervention, we will recommend for the child, with permission from the parents, to see an occupational therapist for treatment. The parents are encouraged to support this because it means the intervention will extend into the home. If a child is reprimanded in class, their behaviour card changes colour, and we will punch the card for every good behaviour shown. Blue (good), green (minor offence), red (spitting, hitting, biting) – time out in the corner to think about what you have done and then come and show remorse and apologise. We also have a TheraKids Centre where the principal uses rhythmic movement to calm children.

Alternative Practitioner

When they made a choice and it is not a lovey choice, it means it is a grouchy choice. Then they have to look at their facial expressions and express themselves to tell I am angry about that and now I can fix it and what am I supposed to do in terms of a lovey option.

Alternative Practitioner

2.4 Collaboration with parents and the broader community

2.4.1 Parental involvement

Interview question
• Briefly describe how the parents get involved in the school activities? (Practitioner) • Describe parental involvement in teaching and learning at your school. (Principal)

The importance of a supportive home environment to support early development and education is well established, and recognised in South African ECD Policy. The Children's Act's Norms and Standards for ECD Programmes makes specific reference to the following:

- Ensuring that parents and caregivers are involved in the development of children (6b)
- Providing education and support to families to fulfil their responsibilities towards child rearing and the holistic development of their children (6c)
- Promoting a positive relationship between the centre, families and the community (6h)

In addition, parents caregivers and families of vulnerable children, children with disabilities and child-headed households must be provided with information, knowledge and skills to promote the development of their children (6l).

For many centres, securing the commitment and involvement of parents is challenging. Figure 18 indicates a range of parental involvement activities for each approach.

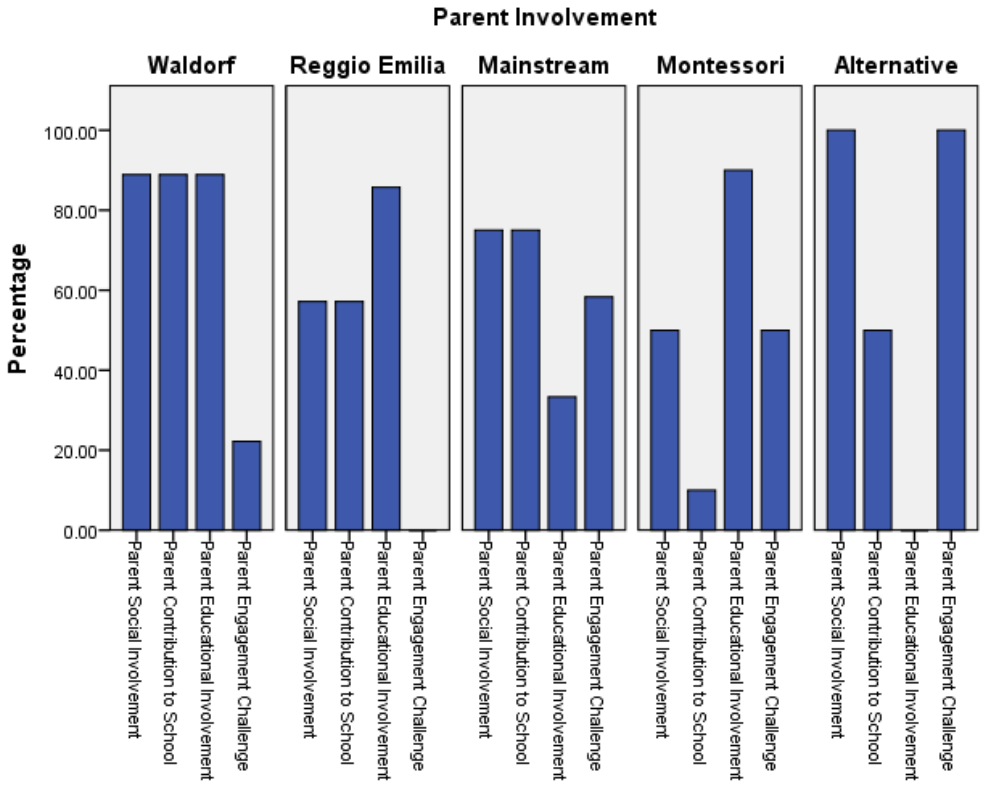

Figure 18: Parental involvement activities

All sampled centres reported several ways that they engage parents. The most common forms of engagement took the form of "social Involvement", such as picnics, cultural days, attending concerts, and supportive "contributions" for the pre-school in the form of work parties, fundraising and participation in the management committee.

Educational involvement meant helping parents contribute to and understand the programme, as well as reporting on their children's progress so that they could support learning and development at home. This last example of engagement was very popular with all approaches, except for the alternative pre-school, which indicated challenges to parental engagement. Parents are a central part of the Waldorf school community. They are encouraged to support the school through fundraising, workdays to repair equipment, and assistance with special activities such as nature walks, plays or festivals. There is a very strong focus on explaining the curriculum to parents.

> *We believe in a three-fold relationship: teacher, parent and child. To involve our parents, we invite them to class meetings. We also teach them about the development stages of their young child and not to rush any development process. Parents are expected to attend parent evenings, individual meetings with teachers, which inform them of children's progress and development. Parents also participate in festivals, fundraising activities and other school events.*
>
> Waldorf Manager, Limpopo

> *We are a whole family, so our parents are very much involved, and we even have some parents who offer to volunteer to work at our vegetable garden… I also have a WhatsApp group where I communicate daily with the parents... open-door policy, they are welcome also to come and speak to me during the day and often I invite parents, that don't know so much about Waldorf, to come and sit with their child for a day or two or three, and really be part and see and play with us and then only do they make the decision. I also do make home visits. In the programme this year, the parents did painting with their children, we did gardening; we did play dough so they can really feel, what it feels like to be a child… some of the parents even went on the slide.*
>
> *Waldorf Manager, Gauteng*

> *We have workshops with parents on what children are learning and how they can apply this at home. Individual parent meetings as well. Parents help with the building structures, fairs and any other activities where we need support – parents help with that a lot.*
>
> *Waldorf Practitioner, Western Cape*

All Reggio Emilia respondents reported actively encouraging parental involvement in the life of the pre-school, although with varying degrees of success. A key aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach is involving parents in the classroom educational activities.

We have a complete open-door policy; the parents are very involved. We have a lot of events... but we bring the parents in more to provide expertise… that's for the children to see a lot of value in the classroom. So, we also do parent training, so we do once a term parent workshops. Last term we did on art and creativity so why is it important that your children do art.

Reggio Emilia Manager, Eastern Cape

The parents of these children are struggling with their own lives, so I am happy that their children rather come to me. Parents generally get involved with regular things like family picnics, fundraising for charity, candlelight social functions, cheese and wine under a theme functions, sports day when it's their child's birthday.

When we did the sea theme last week, Daniel's father (a fisherman) came to school to show the kids how to cut the fish and how to cook the fish, so his father was involved in the whole fishing episode. I might have a mommy who is a teacher, I can ask her to come and show children on how to keep their nails clean or how to cut them.

Reggio Emilia Practitioner, Eastern Cape

Examples of involvement from the mainstream pre-schools included the following:

We've got a parents committee that runs more on the level of the principal, next to the principal for advice and help, you know.

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

The parents have grouped themselves… they clean for their kids… This building was also done by the parents. When the teachers go to meetings and workshops the parents come and stand in.

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

Parents help with transport to trips. They help with little ones in morning. Meetings.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

There were no specific examples of educating the parents about the learning programme, although they provided materials to support the learning activities.

Parents assist to bring animals to school to show and tell.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

In terms of education, we ask them to provide us with poems. We guide them… we say to them compile poems and tales according to our programme. When we talk about my home, bring photos that show families. Show the road to school. The way you draw your sketches….

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

For Cultural Day, we can ask a community member who is well versed in the isiXhosa culture to come and sit with the children. The member will be dressed in traditional attire and use the day to tell the learners stories of old and playing old games. So, we do try and involve them in our activities.

Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

This first response from a manager exemplifies the Montessori approach to parental involvement and is echoed in the other pre-schools, although not all parents may take up the offerings:

Parents play a vital role in the school. So, you know, with the Montessori, we really focus a lot on education, parent education – educating the parents on Montessori and how they can help at home. We communicate a lot with the parents. We rely very heavily on them to also come to us with anything that they have noticed at home. I try and get speakers up here as often as possible to speak to the parents about Montessori.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

They attend meetings, they contribute, they help out with outings when we need support. We have one fundraiser for the year, they make donations. We invited them to be part of our PTA and some parents are just too busy. The kids' grandparents can come during the open day and see in the classroom what they do, sometimes parents want to sit in the class, and we allow them. We also have verbal meetings with the parents twice a year and also written reports twice a year.

Montessori Manager, Western Cape

We have meetings with the parents to discuss the children. Like in the beginning of the next term we will have interviews with the parents, especially if there are things we are concerned about. But other than that, we don't have parents coming in… we invite parents to come and observe.

Montessori Manager, Gauteng

They are not actively involved, no, but we do have meetings with them, and we have parents' days; and when we have parents' days, we put them outside and we talk to them and we put them in the classroom and we make them the children and we teach them.

Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

The alternative pre-school has a very structured parental involvement programme with parent conference days each term where parents can have a 15-minute feedback session with the practitioner. Parents are also invited to go on field trips, attend an introductory braai, and a concert or play. They have the opportunity to come and sit in four times a year, and there is an open day with the parents, where they can see all the activities happening. Parents receive surveys to give feedback to the school and reflect on the quality of school's services.

We do ask them to do it and then we have activities and stuff that we ask them to do sometimes they give feedback. Like today, we have parents' meeting then they come ask us what they can do at home and so on.

Alternative Practitioner

We send out a questionnaire once a year to say: "Do you feel everything is up to par? Do you see any weaknesses? Are there any strengths?" So, from the parents' part we have that. The teachers fill in that very same questionnaire according to their class, so we do a kind of a radical review of the class, of the school, every year to see where we are going, so the standards are kind of personal, and also from the parents' view, objective.

Alternative Manager

Challenges and solutions

A common problem for many pre-schools in all the approaches was the low level of parents' attendance at meetings, lack of support by many parents and, in some reports, lack of fee payment.

We are faced with financial problems. Although our fees are not that high, our parents don't want to commit to paying school fees.

Waldorf Manager, Limpopo

We tried to involve them in meetings, but you find out that they are not coming. Maybe two or four parents in a meeting.

Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

Eish, the parents, hey, they don't bother. They don't even come and help us at the school.

Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

For parents to be more involved in their children's school and be more supportive… will help us in a big way. The parents are supposed to inform us of what's happening at home… so that we can support their children and the parents have a responsibility and a role to play in school fees because we are private, we don't get any funds from anybody.

Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

They don't really get involved. They have an attitude, and we are trying to offer training workshops to get them interested.

Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

Most of the kids are dropped with taxis. The parents… I can just use on my one hand the parents that are involved and mostly it's parents coming from the city that says we need to do this and this, and they're not aware of their child's age appropriateness and so they are not a benefit to us, they're actually demand[ing] stuff that is not possible; asking us to have their three-year-old start to read. It's not appropriate.

Alternative Manager

Efforts to increase parental involvement include the use of media and trying to find times that are convenient for parents to attend.

I ask them for the days that they are available so that we can organise something around those. We send letters, WhatsApp, we have a group, and we put on Facebook.

Waldorf Practitioner, Eastern Cape

We do have parents that work, parents that don't have transport, so what we have done is that we try to make it available, like on a Saturday morning, not only during the week, for the working parents… so it's improving, as we persevered and encouraged it has improved.

Reggio Emilia Manager, Eastern Cape

If we put some newsletters in their school bags at least they will respond.

Mainstream Practitioner, Western Cape

2.4.2 Inter-school and broader community collaboration

Interview question

- Discuss relationships the centre has with the schools and/the broader community? (Principal)

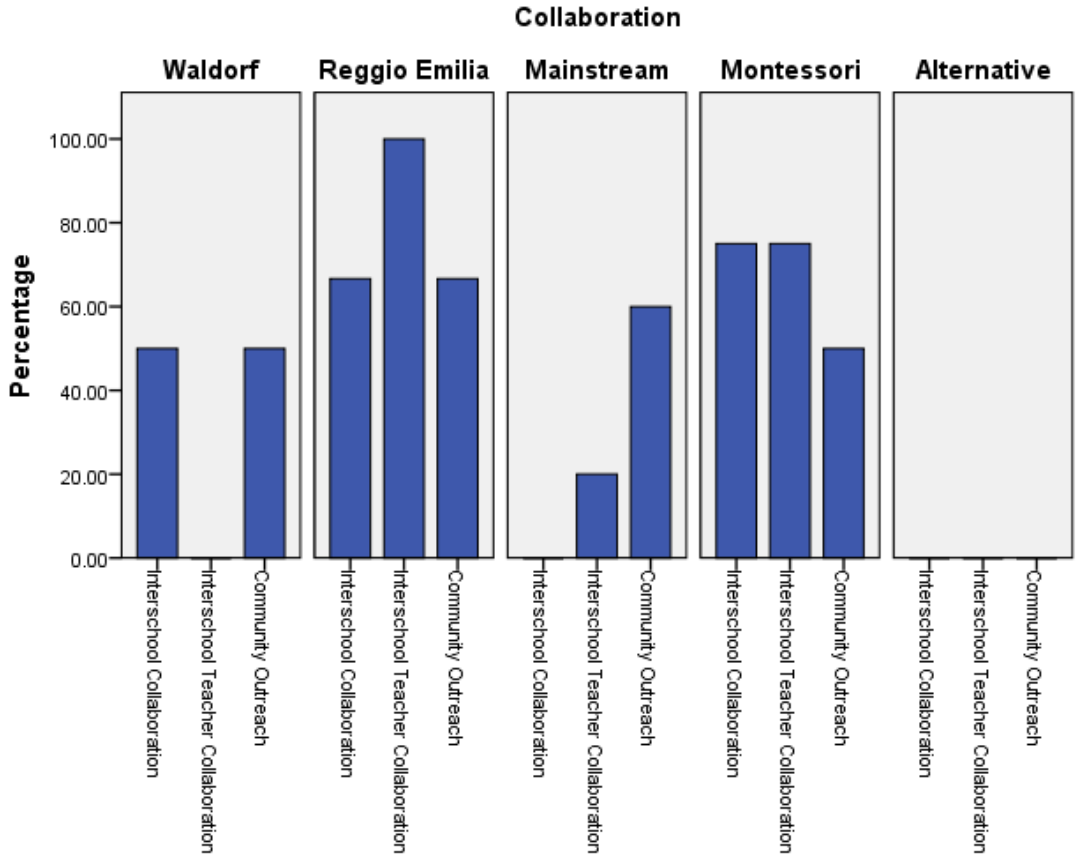

Figure 19: Inter-school and community collaboration

Networking with pre-schools/schools for staff professional development purposes has been covered in section 2.1.3. The data presented for this question talks to other kinds of networking and building relationships with broader community members and services. These relationships might be with local service providers or primary schools to which the children would transition. Community outreach involves working in a charitable or symbiotic way with the community, or other community bodies. Inter-school collaboration includes partnering with other schools for activities. Inter-school teacher collaboration involves the sharing/ collaboration of teachers, for the benefit of the children or schools.

Some of the different approaches host ECD trainees for observation:

> *[An NGO training provider] sends in the teachers that are training for Level 4. So, these teachers are from different provinces (KZN, Limpopo, etc.). They come and observe from morning to 12:00 so twice or thrice a week.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Manager, Gauteng

> *Buffalo City College sends students to do observations. The principal also tries to collaborate with local primary schools.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

Involvement with community resources and services, as well as neighbours, was also noted by several respondents across approaches:

> *[The] community is supportive. They watch for the safety of the premises. Assist with traffic when parents drop and fetch the children. Police give presentations. First aiders come and do a course for the teachers. A mobile library comes around.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Gauteng

> *We have relationships with the greater community because the community is not exclusively the parents. When we have an event or fundraising, we extend the invitation to the community and not just the parents. We do try to get stakeholders, for example, there is the Traffic Department, and they send someone to come and show children how to cross the road.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

Workshops offered – that is usually the fire training, and the first aid training, that we usually call the schools in the area, that do not have training or have appointed a new person, then we will tell them: "We have training, would you like to join?" And then we do the training together, we try all the time to get at least 10 to 12 people together, we call the schools in the area and we work together.

Montessori Manager, Western Cape

As approaches like Waldorf, Reggio Emilia and Montessori are less well known in the ECD or schooling sector, as well as by parents who are familiar with mainstream practices, these approaches make a particular point of reaching out to other pre-schools/schools and community members and inviting them to events.

We do have a relationship with the community, parents seem quite keen to have their children to come here, they want their children to learn English not because of Waldorf… It's predominantly Xhosa children. We try to build a relationship with other schools, for instance our lantern festival where children from other schools are bussed over… We do have the workshops where people are invited, we have at the end of the year a Christmas festival, where the whole community is welcomed.

Waldorf Manager, Eastern Cape

With the broader community, we do these workshops, we're doing one now called the wonders of learning… I wanted to expose people to just the Reggio approach for a lot of the private schools… to come in here... and just experience what we do… so we do that once a year, we would love to do that more often, but time…

Reggio Emilia Manager, Eastern Cape

Well, in the community, nobody knows what Montessori is, so that's a big challenge.

Montessori Manager, Eastern Cape

Some of the respondents indicated tensions in their communities, often around attracting enrolments, and the alternative pre-school in Limpopo indicated that this was because of community prejudice towards their enrolment of white and black children.

Here in Site 5, I cannot go and observe at [another centre], it is going to sound like I am coming to steal children. There is that stigma that if a lot of children come to your school you are stealing the children...

Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

Some felt that collaboration, especially with "mainstream" schools, was a challenge as they were more interested in filling the quota rather than if the child is ready or not. This also applied to schools only accepting children in Grade 1 who had attended their Grade R classes.

We've lost a lot of our Grade R or our six-year-olds because the [public primary] schools in the area are saying that they need to complete Grade R [there], some even taking four-year-olds.

Montessori Manager, Limpopo

2.5 Challenges experienced and comment on the South African ECD sector

Interview questions

- As an Educare teacher, what challenges do you experience? (Practitioner)
- What are some of the biggest challenges this centre faces? (Principal)
- Would you like to comment on the existing South African ECD sector? (Practitioner and Principal)

This section summarises challenges expressed by principals and practitioners that have not been integrated into the section on parental involvement above and systemic comment on the existing South African ECD sector because these overlapped substantially.

2.5.1. Financial difficulties

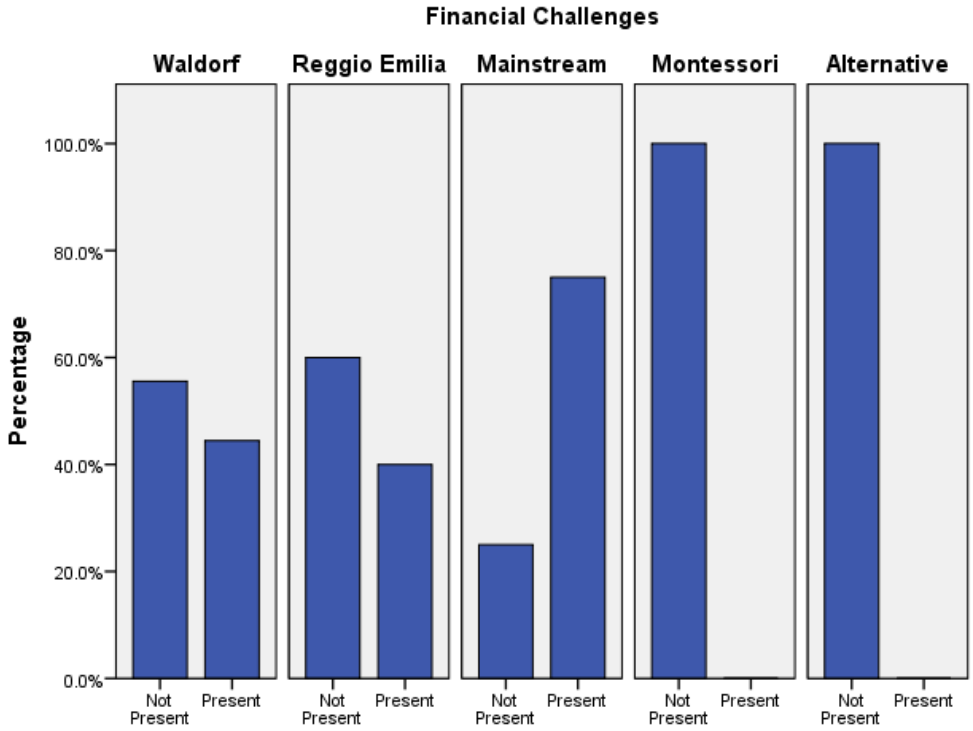

Figure 20: Financial difficulties

Figure 20 shows the proportion of respondents who mention the presence of financial difficulties in the school. Financial struggles and poor working conditions were mentioned in particular, but not only by the four mainstream centres.

Funding for a private school is also a challenge. We are trying to [attract enrolment] so that our numbers can increase.
Reggio Emilia Manager, Western Cape

Mainstream pre-schools in the sample, which tended to serve poorer communities, indicated reliance on DSD subsidisation and the struggle of parents to pay fees, as well as the impact of poor wages on the retention of trained staff.

> *So, the challenge is that parents are unable to pay R350 every month.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

> *We really need the subsidy so that we can be able to explore with children. School fees, (parents) struggle to pay.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Gauteng

> *This stipend paid out by Social Development is only for 20 children and that is very small.*[7] *It only comes every quarter, so teachers are dependent on the school fees to earn an income. What you find is that when training opportunities arise for teachers, upon their return, they don't stay for too long before going to look for greener pastures.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

Financial challenges also limit the availability of materials and resources, as well as access to subsidised training opportunities.

> *Remember that these training opportunities are not always available because these places are also dependent on donors for funding.*
>
> Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

> *Can't pay to study with my salary.*
>
> Mainstream Practitioner, Gauteng

> *It's resources (and professional development to document) that can actually boost the approach like cameras, being able to print you know the whole technology thing. It's only one person in the centre that can do [so] and this becomes too much.*
>
> Reggio Emilia Manager, Gauteng

[7] This is the Department of Social Development's per child subsidy of R15 per qualifying child per day.

[Government] must provide the books every year. We will also ask the Minister for salaries. The practitioners only get [a] stipend. And that stipend amount to R1 500.00.[8]

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

As a result, there were several calls for government support, such as the following:

[There] must be more intervention from government to regulate this industry, you know. For instance, we have to pay industry salaries to the teachers, that is important.

Mainstream Manager, Gauteng

2.5.2 Infrastructure

Infrastructure problems were also mentioned, especially by the mainstream pre-schools where three of the four schools commented on their lack of space.

[There] is lack of space in this building. We have dolls' beds, we have stoves for fantasy area, but because the building is too small, we are not using them… We don't have water. We use water from the secondary school. In terms of electricity, the municipality requires us to pay R8 000.00 for installation. We can't afford that. We have photocopiers and fridges, but we can't use them.

Mainstream Manager, Limpopo

Space for more children – we need more space.

Mainstream Manager, Gauteng

Space is also a challenge to grow the centre… Local councillors can help us with space or land and to assist with building structures for these centres so that we can grow and contribute better.

Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

[8] This may be the stipend paid while in training.

2.5.3 Registration as a partial care and ECD facility

Getting registered with their provincial DSD was a common challenge, except for the mainstream pre-schools, which were selected on the basis of being registered.

> *Especially when it comes to registration, why do they always drag things out and then want to close down schools that are not registered. But then following the process drags on, files go missing.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Western Cape

> *For schools to register… Ijooo. Even if you re-register you wait for a long time.*
>
> Montessori Manager, Gauteng

> *The Department of Social Development must get to all the schools on the map, not only the good schools. More, especially those who want to do it the right way (like registering, you know).*
>
> Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

> *It's taking forever to get registered as a school.*
>
> Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

The lack of registered centres and proliferation of unregulated facilities also received some comment:

> *We need regulations. The same [as] with government schools, schools can't just open left, right and centre. I think it should be the same for day care centres because here we lay the foundation.*
>
> Montessori Practitioner, Gauteng

> *Lots of pre-schools popping up, and there is no regulation that says you are not qualified, you can't open a school, you don't have the resources, you don't have the structure. Anybody can do whatever they feel like. The Social Development comes by, and checks a few papers, but it is corrupt.*
>
> Alternative Manager

2.5.4 Training and support

In addition to requests for more in-depth training on the NCF, CAPS and NELDS reflected on in section 2.1.3, there were a number of comments on the need for supported training in the ECD sector as a whole, including one comment on developing male ECD practitioners.

There is a need also for proper teacher training. The training should facilitate the teacher as a role model to the child.
Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

There should be training places that can help the people to train for ECD. Maybe you grew up in the Eastern Cape and you cannot speak English, you cannot write English, there should be resources to help those women.
Mainstream Manager, Western Cape

We need more knowledge and training and workshops.
Mainstream Manager, Eastern Cape

Mostly… the way I see it… we still need training. So that we can learn.
Mainstream Practitioner, Limpopo

There is not enough attention given to teachers, the quality of teachers and the unqualified teachers.
Montessori Practitioner, Eastern Cape

2.5.5 Curriculum-related challenges and comments

There was concern from the Waldorf, Montessori and alternative pre-school respondents about the formality and pre-academic approach of many mainstream ECD programmes, which de-emphasise play, creativity and movement. In addition, the mixed age grouping is not understood.

Usually, under the mainstream school, you are expected to have your baby group, your toddler group, your nursery school group, your Grade R group, and then Grade 1, Grade 2…. And then we have a mixed group, a mixed age group because that is our ethos. So, it is difficult for people to understand… and I think that is something that is a bit of a challenge.

Waldorf Manager, Eastern Cape

Let the child develop at their own pace. If we rush learning, it forces the child to complete certain things by a certain time.

Waldorf Manager, Limpopo

I would like to see, not only in the primary [school] and kindergarten, they don't do art, and it is so vital for the development, emotional and physical development… so to see that which is creative brought into the curriculum.

Waldorf Manager, Eastern Cape

Children must play. There should be more play included. There is not enough time or emphasis on play.

Waldorf Practitioner, Gauteng

Too much homework, too much time consumed with petty stuff, too little movement – the child must enjoy what he is doing; he must have the freedom of exploration. Too little resources available in the schools, too little parent involvement.

Alternative Manager

Most of the pre-schools are very formal. Everybody sits on desks.

Alternative Practitioner

3. Discussion and implications for ECD training and quality assurance

3.1 Answering the research sub-questions

This section summarises the findings of the research sub-questions. It also examines how practitioner understandings of their approach and reported teaching strategies are consistent with what research has shown to be best practice for facilitating child learning outcomes. Finally, it notes how practitioner observations about context link to evidence of factors known to affect the quality of programme delivery. Sub-questions 2 and 4 were not directly addressed in the interview questions, so we have drawn on applicable responses in practitioner-reported perceptions of their curriculum approach and of challenges relating to the learning environment that were expressed while answering other questions.

3.1.1 How do practitioners understand the approach that informs their practice?

An expert consensus study on good-quality ECD approaches (Pearson et al., 2017) had strongest consensus on the importance of classroom-based practitioners' understanding:

- The importance of quality interactions for infant and child development
- Principles of holistic child development (multiple domains)
- Play-based learning approaches and their importance for children's holistic development

Respondents from all the approaches referred to facilitating holistic development and provided examples of interactions with learners to enhance their learning. However, although respondents across curricula referred to learning through play, there were few responses indicating use of the continuum of different types of play for teaching and learning. This suggests the need for more focused training on the application of different types of play in supporting the development of different skills in early childhood.

The NCF and NELDS are intended to underpin early learning programmes in South Africa. However, familiarity with these guidelines was limited across all the sampled curricula and there had been little training in this regard. It is also clear that, for those who were familiar with the NCF, it was not easy to use for programme planning. So, while these refer to all domains of development and promote a play-based approach to teaching and learning, these cases indicate a need to assist practitioners to apply them, together with the underlying approach.

Mainstream pre-school practitioners were less able to articulate their approach compared with practitioners representing the other approaches, and their responses focused more on activities organised according to themes than the underlying principles. It was clear that there was wide reliance on explicit curricula developed by different providers rather than applying their own contextualisation of their ECD training. This may be because of insufficient emphasis on child development and the play continuum in initial training, as well as on the need for further professional development.

The Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, Montessori and alternative respondents were almost all able to explain the key features of their educational philosophy and pedagogy. Waldorf, Reggio Emilia and Montessori respondents strongly emphasised preparation of the environment as a crucial part of their approaches. This is also important for the NCF, but the mainstream respondents did not highlight it. Respondents from the alternative pre-school, which draws on occupational therapy practice among other sources, had less to say about the environment as teachers.

There was a strong emphasis on the outdoors/natural world as offering learning opportunities in Waldorf, Montessori and in the examples given of using nature/natural objects as "provocation" for exploration in Reggio Emilia. Mainstream pre-school respondents did not refer to the use of the outdoors or nature, which may reflect a lack of suitable outdoor spaces at many of their premises as much as not understanding the opportunities this provides.

Across the approaches, few respondents articulated a clear policy with regard to LoLT. English instruction was most common, often due to mixed language enrolments. Practitioners used the vernacular or gestures to support communication where this was possible, but in an ad-hoc manner. As there was an interview question relating to language use, this suggests that there is a need for guidance on how to apply additive multilingualism in early learning programmes.

3.1.2 What do practitioners perceive as their role and that of a child in the classroom?

International evidence identifies the following as strategies that facilitate positive child learning outcomes:

- Opportunities for child-initiated activities alone and with peers, as well as adult-led group individual and small- and whole-group activities (Jenkins & Duncan, 2017; Montie et al., 2006; Phillips et al., 2017; Sylva et al., 2007). This links to the play continuum with play that is freely chosen by children, through adult-guided play, where adults scaffold child-led play, to adult-structured activities where the teacher designs, sets rules and scaffolds play with a particular learning objective (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013; Jensen et al., 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2017). Highly teacher-controlled, direct instruction methods, such as large-group worksheet-based academic activities, should be avoided as they have been linked with stress and reduced motivation in pre-school children (Elkind, 1986; Stipek et al., 1995).
- Sensitive, mediated practitioner/child interaction targeted to the developmental level and needs of individual children (Aga Khan Foundation, 2010; Center on the Developing Child, 2016; Sylva et al., 2007; Unesco, 2017), and designed to address areas that need strengthening. This requires careful planning and assessment of individual abilities (Grisham-Brown et al., 2006).
- Warm, supportive and encouraging relationships with programme staff (Aga Khan Foundation, 2010; DFID, 2017; Hamre & Pianta, 2005) will facilitate learning, as well as the development of social and emotional skills associated with successful school transition (Shala, 2013).

Perceptions of teachers' and children's roles

Respondents were not directly asked about the teachers' and the children's role, and data was limited, unless this was an explicit focus of the approach to teaching and learning. The Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia pre-schools therefore provided more responses about the role of the teacher. Montessori, in particular, highlights the teacher as a role model of appropriate behaviour and to act as a guide to the activities children freely select and explore. To a lesser extent, Waldorf, which is based on the notion of children learning by imitation, requires the teacher to model appropriately. Reggio Emilia-inspired centre respondents perceived the role of the teacher as a co-researcher with the children who were competent and capable agents of their own learning. This construction of the child is most in line with the NCF's theme "I am a competent person". Mainstream respondents gave examples of how they encouraged children's participation by playing with them. This suggests that there should be a more explicit focus in qualifications training on the role of the teacher.

Across all approaches, practitioner relationships with children were reported to be warm and encouraging. This is reflected both in responses about how to develop children's confidence and participation, and in reported strategies for handling inappropriate behaviour.

All approaches recognised that children were learning in playful ways by interacting with each other and with materials. Mainstream, Montessori and alternative respondents talked mostly about free play outdoors. Waldorf focuses strongly on free imaginative and creative play and exploration. In relation to other parts of the play continuum, the Montessori guidance of freely chosen activities is close to playful instruction and the Reggio Emilia provocation approach links to co-opted play where the practitioners build on what the child is trying to do and see themselves as co-learners. There was only one reference to the use of worksheets (alternative respondent), which would not be viewed as play according to prevailing pedagogical views.

The mixed vertical age grouping of Montessori and Waldorf builds on the principle that children's learning can be scaffolded by older children and there were similar references in the other approaches to children learning from more capable peers, as well as from the practitioner. While multi-age grouping over three years is a sound strategy, it is discouraged by the Children's Act's partial care registration framework, which, for a full registration rating, requires separation of children by age. In Montessori and Waldorf classes, reception-age children are integrated into the mixed age class, although they will be given more advanced work in line with the CAPS requirements. This is a challenging issue for Montessori and Waldorf training institutions because ECD qualifications do not include the reception year.

Respondents from all the approaches talked of offering opportunities for children to work individually, or to partner or be in small groups. In most cases, it seems that these were self-chosen. All included teacher-directed group times. These were contained within a regular daily schedule for all approaches, allowing for a balance of typical ECD activities, including morning rings (where daily themes were often introduced), indoor and outdoor play with a range of materials and story time interspersed with routines for snacks, meals and toilet. Some pre-schools offered special activities on particular days of the week. Within these frameworks, which ensure that holistic needs are met and enable children to feel secure and to learn about time and sequence, individual practitioners reported being more or less flexible to the age or mood of children and/or opportunities where something took the children's interest.

Themes were used to integrate different activities in most approaches, although in Reggio Emilia, these varied according to children's interests. Montessori's "subject areas" (practical life, sensorial, mathematics, language, geography, botany, zoology and culture) organise the curriculum content. Waldorf follows the seasons and their related festivals as their themes. Mainstream pre-schools used either themes proposed in departmental training or theme guides from other providers to structure the content they offer.

Meeting individual children's needs

In relation to age- and stage-appropriate activities and meeting individual children's needs, all curricula indicated observing children to see whether they found an activity interesting and manageable. Montessori has the most structured approach to this as all activities are clearly sequenced. Similarly, the alternative pre-school used detailed developmental assessments to determine where children need to focus. These two approaches had the strongest focus on the individual. Waldorf respondents explained how they have more complex craft activities for older children, but other than that, children learn from each other in free play. The Reggio Emilia approach also allows children to develop at their own pace and according to their own learning style, but very much in a social context. The mainstream pre-schools had a less articulated approach to age- and stage-appropriate developments.

As respondents across all approaches reported progress assessment, it would be valuable to link this very directly to exposing children to targeted learning activities. This could be for the class as a whole if there are general gaps, as well as for individual children. The draft NCF child assessment tool, once available, will assist with this, but practitioners will require specific training.

Closely aligned to the theme of age- and stage-appropriate activities is the issue of how each approach responds to special needs or barriers to learning. Of interest is that several of the sampled pre-schools referred to themselves as inclusive schools and had enrolled children with delays and disabilities. Montessori, Waldorf and the alternative pre-school all have curricula suitable for a spectrum of needs with easy access to specialist support if necessary (some have remedial staff attached to their institutions). Mainstream pre-schools also enrolled children with disabilities, but appeared to be managing in an ad hoc-manner and without the external support available to the more affluent pre-schools representing the other curricula. The paucity of special needs teachers has been noted in several ECD Sub-sector Skills Plan updates (ETDP SETA, 2013; 2019; 2020). As well as providing for a specialist cadre of special needs teachers to support referrals, continuing professional development on the topic of supporting children with special needs is required for mainstream staff. Issues of resourcing such as provision for higher adult-to-child ratios and special adaptive equipment to support children with extra needs also require urgent attention.

3.1.3 Which contextual factors are perceived to be impacting on learning and teaching?

Lack of parental support was one of the most widely reported contextual factors, especially the non-attendance at meetings. A quality audit of ECD centres in the Western Cape found that better support by DSD is associated with improved engagement with parents on the part of sites and better staffing support and conditions (Dawes et al., 2010). There were a few reports of parents having different approaches to discipline, overexposure to cell phones/television and, in one instance, parents demanded that children be taught reading. In the Cape Town-based mainstream pre-school, children's poor home circumstances, characterised by hunger and overcrowded living conditions, were noted as a reality to be faced, and this would be common to children enrolled in many mainstream pre-schools across the country. A key contributor to the lack of parental involvement commonly reported in South Africa is likely to be time poverty and other priorities of poor working parents. But this is not always the case. One rural mainstream pre-school reported an extraordinary degree of parental support. This suggests that a disjuncture between school management and local communities may also contribute to lack of engagement.

There were also a number of comments across approaches about the need for access to training, including subsidised training. This is especially important both to realise the entry-level NQF Level 4 qualification and skills programmes targeting specific programme gaps, and to contribute to the professionalisation of the ECD workforce by providing access to the NQF Level 6 Diploma and the BEd ECCE now being developed. Access to a variety of internal and external CPD opportunities was most prevalent for the better resourced Waldorf, Reggio Emilia and Montessori pre-schools.

The need for regulation of the sector and the difficulty of achieving registration with DSD were reported as key contextual challenges. These are a major sector challenge and government has engaged in several programmes aimed at addressing this. Current initiatives include the Vangasali campaign to identify all sites for registration purposes and the ECD conditional grant, which has an infrastructure component to assist sites to meet the criteria for registration. The challenge with registration for respondents in this study was related to the slow DSD process and was expressed by non-mainstream approaches as the mainstream pre-schools were already registered.

Socio-economic differences between the mainstream pre-schools and other approaches (even though some of these enrolled poorer children) are reflected in the number of mainstream comments about financial struggles, poor salaries, long working hours, lack of public recognition of the service provided, as well as a lack of suitable space and infrastructure. All these factors are frequently noted in local studies of the sector (Biersteker, 2019; EPRI, 2014; Ilifa Labantwana, 2017; Richter et al., 2012). In contrast, practitioners implementing the other curricula expressed learning programme-related concerns, such as the lack of understanding of the value of play, leading to a formal academic approach, and lack of understanding/acceptance of mixed age grouping.

3.1.4 What do practitioners understand as the ideal learning environment?

This question was not directly asked, but responses to questions on needed materials, daily routine and parental and community collaboration provide a partial answer. Research links the presence of varied learning materials in the classroom to better child learning outcomes (Aboud, 2006; Montie et al., 2006; Trawick-Smith et al., 2015; Unesco, 2017). There is a strong movement that propounds open-ended (loose parts) play materials as allowing for better symbolic play, problem solving and creativity (e.g. Sears, 2016), although there has been little robust research on this (Gibson et al., 2017).

Careful set up of the environment to stimulate engagement is important for all curricula, but this is most explicitly seen as the teacher in the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches.

In response to the question about needed resources, one of the rural mainstream pre-schools indicated that government should provide books and posters, while the need for equipment such as a photocopier or cameras for documenting work was indicated by a Reggio Emilia pre-school. The mainstream and alternative pre-schools used a variety of play materials, although they most often referred to manufactured material.

Waldorf and Reggio Emilia pre-schools have a strong focus on home-made, natural, found and/or recycled materials (the open-ended materials referred to above), although they also use crayons, paints, blocks and puzzles. Montessori pre-schools require specialised and graded equipment, some of which is self-correcting, as well as real household objects for practical life. Special equipment is expensive, yet durable, and the use of open-ended materials provides for imagination and cognitive development.

Parenting practices such as supporting early language and literacy, responsivity and warmth improve developmental outcomes (Melhuish, 2010) and a parental education component to early learning programmes is considered to be best practice. Even though evidence of the effectiveness of parenting education is mixed, parental and community engagement support and strengthening both home-school transitions and the early learning institution are important. Responses from all curricula demonstrate an understanding of the importance of parental involvement for sustainability and support for the pre-school to reinforce children's learning. Educating parents so that they can support home learning was a stronger focus of the Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia curricula. Mainstream pre-schools reported fewer activities to educate parents about the programme. This may be improved by a stronger emphasis in qualifications training and short courses, but is undoubtedly influenced by challenges in securing parental involvement.

3.1.5 What do practitioners understand school-readiness to be?

Recent evidence indicates that, to promote school-readiness, there should be a targeted focus on specific school-readiness skills (early mathematics and literacy) with clear learning goals, rather than a general whole-child curriculum, which includes these skills (Center on the Developing Child, 2016; Phillips et al., 2017; Unesco, 2017) and a focus on rich language and literacy experiences as the basis for learning and later reading (Lonigan et al., 2000; Opel et al., 2009; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). The alternative and Montessori approaches included a much greater focus on specific school-readiness skills such as phonics, and in the case of Montessori, early reading, and numbers and maths exercises that exceeded the Grade R CAPS requirements.

General skills noted by all curricula included task orientation, confidence, independence and ability to communicate. Physical readiness (gross and fine motor skills) was most strongly emphasised by the Waldorf and alternative approaches. It therefore appears that only the Montessori and alternative pre-schools have a targeted focus on mathematics and literacy skills, with the other approaches following a more general holistic approach. If, as the effectiveness evidence suggests, a specific focus on mathematics and literacy skills were to be introduced, it would be critical to do this in a play-based way rather than resorting to formal instruction. It would also require more explicit curriculum guidance than the NCF currently provides.

3.2 Implications of findings in relation to key policy documents

In this section, practitioner reports of practice are considered in relation to the major policies and regulations governing ECD 0–4 years in South Africa. These include guidance from the following sources:

- The National Integrated ECD Policy (RSA, 2015)
- The South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four (DBE, 2015)
- The Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for ECD Educators (DHET, 2017)
- The Children's Act, Act No. 38 of 2005, as amended, Regulations, Norms and Standards for ECD Programmes (RSA, 2010)

The NELDS Policy is not specifically referenced as it refers to desired child outcomes rather than curriculum practice, and the NCF guideline was developed with reference to these. Not all the aspects of these policies are covered by direct interview questions, although some may have been referred to as part of other responses.

3.2.1 National Integrated ECD Policy

The NIECD Policy (Republic of South Africa, 2015) provides that early learning programmes should all be designed using the NCF as a guide (see section 3.2.2) with two objectives:

- Promote resourcefulness of children
- Promote language and cognitive development

The policy defines resourcefulness very broadly to include an emerging sense of self, an increased ability to regulate emotional expression, a growing understanding of the feelings of others (empathic ability), emerging independence, a capacity for initiative, task persistence and attentiveness. Provision for development of physical, perceptual and sensorimotor skills is also noted. Language and cognitive development includes language development and storytelling, play, creativity, critical thinking and exploration, and pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills. As far as is feasible and practical, the medium of instruction should be the home tongue of the child.

How do the approaches in the case study align with NIECD?

On the basis of practitioner responses, all approaches encouraged behavioural self- regulation and it is likely that the teaching stories and mediation to help resolve conflicts in most approaches assisted in developing empathic ability. It might be argued, based on interview responses, that independence, initiative, task persistence and attentiveness were most explicitly nurtured by the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches, although this does not mean that they were not supported by the other approaches. Physical development was a reported focus of the Waldorf and alternative pre-schools, and the Montessori, Reggio Emilia and alternative pre-schools have an explicit focus on sensorimotor learning.

Regarding cognition, language and creativity, there were strong differences across approaches. Montessori has a strong focus on pre-academic work in preparation for schooling, and while they do not refer to it as such, it seems that the alternative pre-school also focuses on specific building blocks towards formal learning (including worksheets). The Waldorf and Reggio Emilia pre-schools have a different approach to nurturing cognitive development, focusing on child-led play activities and using many found and natural materials to help children develop concepts, problem-solving and inquiry.

A focus on creative expression and imagination is perhaps strongest in the Waldorf approach, including dramatising stories, fantasy play and crafts. The Reggio Emilia approach uses the arts as one of the 100 languages in which children express what they have learnt. Mainstream pre-schools vary in their approach, depending on the curriculum resources they are using. Little information was provided on this.

Regarding use of home language where possible, only rural mainstream pre-schools use the vernacular. All the other pre-schools used English (or in one case, English/Afrikaans), whether rural or urban, with some ad-hoc translanguaging. It is noteworthy that, for translanguaging to be effective as a pedagogical practice, appropriate training needs to take place. This reflects the huge challenge of multilingual enrolments in urban areas, as well as a strong push from parents for English-medium learning and teaching.

3.2.2 National Curriculum Framework

The South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four provides goals for children's development and learning as a guideline for planning high-quality learning experiences and for assessing children's performance, but it is not prescriptive. It is organised around the six early learning and development areas:

Together, these cover the key domains for young children's learning and development, and facilitate the design of early learning programmes in South Africa. The framework further breaks activities into developmental phases, allowing for age-appropriate progression.

The DBE/Unicef have developed child assessment guidelines and resource materials to assist in implementing the NCF. However, while both have been piloted, neither is yet in the public domain. What is evident across the studied approaches is that, despite widely reported unfamiliarity with the NCF, practitioners in all approaches touched on all the ELDAs. However, the non-mainstream pre-schools gave more examples of the ELDAs covered in their practice than the mainstream practitioners. This may well reflect gaps in training and/or the ability of practitioners to articulate their practice. The Waldorf, Reggio Emilia and alternative pre-schools place more focus on creativity than either the Montessori or mainstream practitioners reported. Mainstream practitioners also gave relatively fewer responses concerning identity and belonging in social and emotional development.

As well as the ELDAs, the NCF is based on the following key principles:

- Integrating different learning goals in activities
- The age- and stage-appropriateness of activities for classes and individual children (including formative assessment)
- Children with special needs and developmental delays
- Indigenous and local knowledge skills and behaviours

- Mother tongue and multilingualism
- The importance of play (and how it is understood)

With regard to these, it is likely that learning goals are integrated in activities and at least one mainstream practitioner commented on this. There were many examples across all approaches of adapting activities for classes and individual children, depending on their age and stage, and of different methods of formative assessment. In the absence of a standard assessment protocol, it is not clear if these assessments fully covered all the key indicators for each domain per age and stage.

Those approaches with greater opportunities for individual engagement (Montessori, alternative, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia) reported being well able to support special needs/learning barriers. Less well-resourced mainstream pre-schools attempted to do so, but reported finding this very challenging. With regard to indigenous and local knowledge skills, two mainstream pre-schools reported having cultural days, and one Reggio Emilia pre-school engaged parents in sharing their knowledge and skills. Generally, this area was one that needs more attention.

Similarly, across all approaches, there was insufficient attention to mother tongue teaching and multilingualism**.** One or two pre-schools reported introducing other languages informally, but in pre-schools with a mixed language enrolment, English dominated and limited translanguaging was reported for children who could not understand. One English and Afrikaans-medium Montessori pre-school provided for group time in these two languages with exposure to other languages at other times.

Finally, with regard to the importance of play, a playful (fun) approach to learning is common to all. There was little explicit focus on a play pedagogy that involves a continuum of strategies, from free play in a prepared environment, through practitioner involvement in children's own play to scaffolded learning (co-opted play) and guided play (where the practitioner initiates a play activity) to playful instruction.

The limited responses may be because of practitioners' understanding of the question. On the whole, free play was referenced. However, in describing their approach to teaching and learning, it is clear that Waldorf favours free play, the Reggio Emilia approach has a strong focus on co-opted play, and Montessori – in demonstrating activities – follows a playful instruction approach. A greater focus on the uses of a range of play strategies for learning and teaching is clearly needed, especially for the mainstream pre-schools. Here too, DHET, DBE and Unicef commissioned Play Learning Materials modules at NQF levels 4, 5, 6 and 7 for training providers to integrate play into their courses. This resource has not yet been released.

3.2.3 Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Educators

The DHET has provided guidance on the minimum set of competencies required of professionally qualified ECD educators. To support the development of standardised programme frameworks for the Diploma and the BEd ECCE, DHET set up the Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (PIECCE), which represented universities, TVET colleges and NGOs. A key output of the PIECCE Consortium was the development of a play-based learning framework. While none of these learning programmes were available during the study period, the implications of practitioner responses to questions that allude to the required professional competencies are important, as they have bearing on the further professional development of ECD practitioners. This is worthy of consideration as it is plausible that the finding in local studies that qualification level is not significantly associated with classroom quality relates to the fact that current South African qualifications are entry level and basic.

The policy aligns with early educational priorities outlined in the NIECD Policy and NCF discussed above. For example, the required professional competences that were interrogated in this study include the following:

- Providing age-appropriate play-based learning activities and fostering exploration
- The ability to recognise and accommodate individual differences

- Developing different early learning areas, including early literacy, early mathematics, social and natural sciences, technology, and the creative arts
- Facilitating the development and learning of children with barriers to learning and special needs
- Selecting and using appropriate methods and procedures for assessing young children's progress, using the results of assessment to improve learning and for reporting to parents, caregivers and other stakeholders
- Collaborating with colleagues, families and community systems to create, maintain and enhance environments in which babies, toddlers and young children develop and learn optimally in all areas of functioning, including referrals
- Demonstrating commitment to acquiring and maintaining current professional knowledge and ongoing professional development

Except for parental and community collaboration and professionalisation, these have been discussed in sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2. Regarding collaboration with parents and the community, all approaches had strategies for engaging parents and community resources to improve all-round learner development, but more advantaged pre-schools had more resources and services at their disposal. The number of professional development opportunities available to the non-mainstream approaches and the wish for support with training expressed by the less-advantaged mainstream practitioners point to a commitment to CPD. Finally, professional educator competence includes the ability to communicate effectively in at least two languages, including conversational competence in an indigenous African language. However, it is not specified how this would be applied in practice.

3.2.4 South African Children's Act

Regulations, norms and standards relating to Chapter 6, Early Childhood Development, in the Children's Act (RSA, 2010) speak to practitioner qualifications, the age grouping of children, broad guidelines to the areas of development to be promoted and relations with families and community. Table 3.1 has been populated using interview responses by practitioners from each approach where there was alignment of the background information and questions with these. The data is therefore not necessarily a reflection of standard practice within each approach.

Table 3.1: How different approaches are reported to align with the Children's Act's Norms and Standards

Regulation, norm or standard	Waldorf	Reggio Emilia	Mainstream	Montessori	Alternative
Age grouping					
9 (a) Where possible, children must be separated into the following age categories in separate rooms or places to ensure their development: (i) Children under the age of 18 months (ii) Children between the ages of 18 and 36 months (iii) Children between the ages of three and four years (iv) Children between the ages of four and six years. (i.e. 4–5 years for mainstream as Grade R is separate)	**	***	***	**	***
Developmental opportunities					
1 (b) and 6 (a) Programmes must be appropriate to the developmental stages and evolving capacity of children	***	***	**	***	***
1 (c) 2(h) 4(a) Programmes must respect and nurture the culture, spirit, dignity, individuality, language and development of each child	?	** (not language and culture)	?	**(not language and culture)	?
5 (a) Programmes must promote appreciation and understanding for children's language	**	**	**	**	**
1 (d) and 2 (c) Programmes must provide opportunities for children to explore their world, and promote self-discovery	***	***	*	***	**
2 (e) Programmes must promote and support the development of motor, communication and sensory abilities in children	***	**	**	**	***
5 (g) Programmes must promote the development of fine sensory and motor skills in children	***	**	**	***	***
2 (f) Programmes must promote self-control, independence and developmentally appropriate responsibility	***	***	**	***	**
2 (g) Activities must promote free communication and interaction amongst children	***	***	***	**	**

3 (a) Creative play and exploratory learning opportunities must be provided to children	***	***	**	**	**
6 (m) Children must be enabled to develop a positive sense of identity and self-worth	***	**	**	***	**
6(n) Children should feel valued and respected when participating in activities	?	***	?	***	?
6 (f) Programmes must promote cognitive development in children	**	***	*	***	***
4 (e) Staff must demonstrate behaviour that promotes positive behaviour by modelling attitudes and interactions with children	***	***	**	***	**
4 (c) Programmes must promote the development of positive social values	***	**	**	***	**
3 (b) (vi) Discipline must be effected in a humane way and promote integrity with due regard to the child's developmental stage and evolving capacities. Children may not be punished physically by hitting, smacking, slapping, kicking or pinching.	***	***	***	***	***
Parental and community collaboration					
6 (b) Programmes must ensure that parents and caregivers are involved in the development of children	***	***	**	***	**
4 (b) Activities must include parents and caregivers in the development of positive social behaviour in children	**	**	**	**	**
6(c) Programmes must provide education and support to parents, caregivers and families to fulfil their responsibilities towards child-rearing and the holistic development of their children	***	***	*	***	*
6 (h) Activities must promote a positive relationship between the centre, families and the community	**	**	**	**	*
6 (j) Existing community resources and strengths must be utilised in promoting the development of children.	*	**	**	**	*

Key: ***Strong evidence **Some evidence *Little or no evidence ? No reference

Table 3.1 indicates the age grouping, developmental opportunities and parental and community collaboration for the three main groups in the Children's Act's Norms and Standards.

Age grouping

The Waldorf and Montessori approaches promote a mixed age grouping for 3–6-year-olds for reasons of peer learning. This is not preferred practice according to the Children's Act, which promotes an age cohort grouping where possible. Infants and toddlers are separated for safety, and this was practice across all curricula. This provision of the Act was noted as a challenge by at least one respondent. The other approaches organised the classes by age.

Developmental opportunities

Broadly, there is alignment across all approaches with the norms and standards, including support for the development of pro-social skills, providing a positive example, and humane and appropriate forms of discipline. While there was evidence across curricula of promoting most domains of development, there were differences in emphasis by different curricula. Notably, less information was provided on the provision of a developmentally appropriate curriculum or on encouraging self-exploration by mainstream respondents who also gave few examples of promoting cognitive development. The Waldorf and Reggio Emilia approaches had a stronger creativity focus and the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches reported a greater focus on supporting individual development. The Waldorf and alternative pre-schools had a very strong focus on motor development.

Parental and community collaboration

All approaches promoted parental collaboration and engaged parents around their children's behaviour and any progress challenges. However, engagement with parents to support their children's educational development was not as strong in the mainstream and alternative pre-schools. Community collaboration was a particular challenge for the alternative pre-school. The Reggio Emilia, mainstream and Montessori respondents provided more examples of drawing on community resources to promote the development of children.

3.3. Limitations and recommendations for further research

These findings, and especially their implications for the wider ECD sector in South Africa, must be seen as tentative in view of the study sample, which is too small to be regarded as generalisable.

In addition, interviewees were limited to comparison of well-known international approaches and mainstream pre-schools as the study did not include some of the widely used pre-school approaches in South Africa (e.g. the Ntataise curriculum, High Scope South Africa Network, the Unlimited Child), which have been used most often to enrich the mainstream pre-school approaches. Providers of the non-mainstream approaches tend to be middle class, better resourced, often English medium (even where they are offered in majority communities) and receive more ongoing professional support and training than is the case of the average ECD provider in the country. In addition, we cannot be certain that the sampled pre-schools are typical examples of their approach. While the less common approaches like Reggio Emilia and Waldorf are more likely to be standard, there are reportedly many different Montessori training programmes, and mainstream pre-schools draw from a range of resources. Further research on some of the more widely implemented South African pre-school programmes would therefore be a valuable addition to understanding teaching and learning practice and practitioner perceptions in South Africa.

There were inconsistencies in the interviewing of different respondents. In several interviews, some questions did not appear to have been presented or the questions were rephrased (possibly during translation) and so elicited responses that did not directly address the original question. In the event of missing questions, if there was reference elsewhere in the interview to this question, this was coded. Another issue is that the amount of information provided in the interviews varied considerably across respondents. This was especially true of some of the mainstream respondents and may mean that the impression given of their limited understanding of their curriculum approach was due to their inability to articulate their practice.

A strength in the interview data was the many useful instances where interviewers probed interviewees to clarify what they had seen in the classrooms, thus eliciting more in-depth information on the practitioners' understanding and delivery. However, this practice was not followed for all interviewees, and not by all interviewers.

As self-reports are often unreliable, and the possibility that what respondents reported was not correctly interpreted, classroom observation data was extremely useful. However, the data provided for scrutiny does not include child progress reports or planning records, so self-reports on these cannot be verified.

Despite these limitations, the interview respondents provided some rich insights into how these different approaches manage key aspects of ECD teaching and learning and how they are supported to do so. These could be a useful resource for those in the DBE and training institutions as they work to improve the quality of teaching and learning for children from birth to four years.

3.4 Recommendations and conclusion

While the perceptions and reported experiences of this small group of practitioners cannot be representative of the ECD sector in South Africa, there are several points of convergence with what is known about policy and programming best practice and challenges. To deliver the quality of the early learning programme that promotes positive child-learning outcomes, it is important to take note of these.

3.4.1 Staff qualifications and professional development support

Practitioner responses indicate that, especially for the mainstream pre-schools (which despite being registered and having some state subsidisation, were not as well resourced as the pre-schools representing the other curricula), access to upgrading their accredited qualifications was limited and cost was often a barrier.

In addition to accredited training, the value of ongoing professional development, with a particular focus on curriculum and teaching and learning/pedagogical practices, was indicated. The Waldorf and Reggio Emilia approaches – and, to a lesser extent, the Montessori pre-schools in this study – had access to ongoing conferences, mentoring and regular sharing with other pre-schools implementing the same curriculum. This enabled practitioners to explain the key beliefs and components informing those curricula, including the view of the child and the implications for the role of the teacher. Mainstream pre-school staff were not professionally supported in the same way. Their limited ability to articulate the principles underlying their approach and role, as well as resorting to the use of a variety of curricula available in the sector, indicates that a professional development support and mentoring system should be put in place.

At least half of all practitioners were unfamiliar with the NCF and some who had received provincial department training indicated that they needed help in applying it. Nevertheless, the flexibility of the framework is indicated in that all curricula addressed the different ELDAs in some way, although certain curricula emphasise different ELDAs more than others. Training using the materials commissioned by DBE/Unicef may help address this gap, as would exposure to different curricula and how they facilitate different ELDAs. Furthermore, access to and training on the use of a standardised and age- and stage-graded child assessment tool based on the NCF's ELDAs is important to enable a stronger focus on teaching to accommodate the individual child's strengths and weaknesses.

The DBE supports play-based early learning, as do all the approaches in this study. However, understandings of play vary greatly and there is a need to expose the sector to recent research on how a continuum of play activities from less to more structure and scaffolding can be used for different kinds of learning. To this end, training material was commissioned by the DHET and the DBE with Unicef support.

Training is conducted on the use of targeted sequential language and literacy, and numeracy and mathematics content within a play-based programme, as this is most effective for developing school-readiness skills.

Recommendations

1) The current programme of learnerships and support for ECD practitioner training should continue, aimed at everyone receiving the entry-level NQF Level 4 qualification and incentives, and support provided for upgrading towards professional qualifications. Attention should be given to accessibility in terms of cost, format, language of instruction and proximity of training venues. New online qualifications may increase the accessible supply, but will need to be evaluated to determine the level and type of learner who is able to benefit from these.
2) Accredited learning programme content should be reviewed to ensure that there is sufficient attention to the underpinning curriculum and pedagogical (teaching and learning) principles.
3) The quality improvement support system envisaged in the NIECD Policy should be put in place. Current DBE/DSD initiatives to develop quality improvement and support are one aspect of this. The SACE has a potentially significant role to play in providing mainstream professional support and continuing professional development.
4) Specific priorities for in-service training include the following:
    - The NCF, its application in the playroom and use of the NCF's child formative assessment package
    - The play-based approach and use of different types of play to promote learning
    - A focus on a specific language and literacy, and numeracy and mathematics component within the play-based programme

3.4.2 Language policy

The NCF and other ECD guidelines encourage home language instruction in early learning programmes. The Children's Act's regulations promote the use of a single language. However, parent's aspirations for their children to learn English, and enrolments of children from many different home languages in a single class, including foreign nationals, makes this challenging. There is great variation between and within different pre-schools in how children are helped to understand and communicate, the use of one or multiple languages, translanguaging and code switching (as seen in this study sample).

There is a need to provide systematic support and guidance to practitioners on the most appropriate strategies and ones that transition to the DBE's School Language Policy.

Recommendation

The LoLT for ECD should be reviewed, taking account of the contextual challenges and School Language Policy, as well as the production of practice guidelines.

3.4.3 Special needs/barriers to learning

Responses to questions to practitioners about how they identify learners who are struggling (barriers to learning) and to principals about how the school supported learners who have academic, social, physical or emotional difficulties generated a range of responses, from supporting children-specific, but minor barriers, learning or behavioural challenges, and children with mild to moderate disabilities. While all curricula had a strategy, those who used developmental screening tools and/or had clearly sequenced activities and thorough recording systems were better able to teach diagnostically and support individual development. Access to the NCF's child assessment tool would help mainstream pre-schools pinpoint specific gaps. Staff trained to support disabilities and appropriate equipment were available in advantaged pre-schools, but mainstream pre-schools indicated that they were willing and included some children with disabilities, but were lacking resources, and staff did not feel that they were providing an appropriate service.

Recommendations

1) The NIECD Policy provides for the development of multi-sectoral guidelines to secure universal access to developmentally appropriate quality ECD services for children with developmental delays and disabilities, including additional funding allocations for this and trained practitioners, as well as access to specialists. Training curricula should be strengthened for this purpose. This should be effected.

2) Access to the NCF's child assessment tool would help mainstream pre-schools to identify developmental gaps and target learning support for minor difficulties. This should be finalised and made available with training.

3.4.4 Parental involvement and education

The majority of pre-schools across the approaches studied offered parents multiple opportunities to help out with school activities and socialise, while slightly fewer efforts were made to educate parents about the learning programme and ways of supporting their children's learning. Without exception, parents were called in when there were behavioural and other problems. Despite the Children's Act requiring parental involvement and education, and the NCF promoting it, and the good reasons for this, many pre-schools struggled to secure this, partly due to competing demands on poor working parents.

Recommendation

Efforts to engage parents should continue, especially concerning the learning programme and key issues such as learning through play, language policy and supporting learning at home. However, parents' circumstances should be recognised and ways of communicating found that are convenient and elicit interest and buy in.

3.4.5 Challenges to be noted

Most of the challenges noted were contextual and are well known to the implementing departments, for example, difficulty in registering an ECD centre as a partial care facility, the lack of financial sustainability in many of the ECD centres and unsuitable infrastructure. These consume much time and energy that should be allocated to improving teaching and learning, especially in the mainstream pre-schools that serve poorer communities.

In addition, some regulatory and curriculum challenges mentioned included the following:

- The need for greater flexibility regarding the application of the Children's Act's norms and standards about age grouping is noted as the Montessori and Waldorf approaches apply family-style grouping (3–6 years) for peer-learning support.
- The overly formal application of the curriculum for Pre-Grade R and Grade R and resolution of departmental resistance to extending children's learning beyond the CAPS requirements, as for example in Montessori Maths and early reading.

Recommendation

There should be discussion about the implications of these and what reasonable accommodations could be made. Officials enforcing them should be appraised of the decision for consistent application.

In conclusion, this small study highlights not only the policy and programming issues to be addressed, but also the possibility that sharing and collaboration across these and other approaches to early learning might help fill some of the programming gaps and enrich ECD quality and practice, which are essential for building the next generation.

As one practitioner expressed it:

> *We have to turn this whole thing on its head. We need to learn who these children we are facing today are and we need to build them for the next 25 years. We need to build them to be resilient. How do we do this? We need to collaborate. Let's engage with each other. Let's work together.*

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Appendix A

Interview questions: ECD Manager

PROVINCE ……

SCHOOL ……

MANAGER ……..

DATE ……

RESEARCHER ……..

1. When was the centre established? Provide some background to the centre and its facilities.
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2. Provide an overview of your educational background.
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3. What is your staff and student complement?

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4. Describe your centre's approach to teaching and learning? What informs it?

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5. What is your understanding of the ECD National Framework/NELDS?

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6. Describe parental involvement in teaching and learning at your school.
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7. How does this school support students who have academic, social, physical or emotional difficulties?
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8. What professional development opportunities do you provide your teachers and yourself?
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9. Do you provide opportunity for teacher collaboration? If so, explain.

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10. What are some of the biggest challenges this centre faces?

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11. Do you record the progress of learners? If so, how is recording and reporting done?

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12. What quality systems do you have in place for teacher development?

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13. What quality systems do you have in place for the children's learning?

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14. Discuss relationships the centre has with the schools and the broader community?

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15. How does your centre prepare three- and four-year-olds for Grade R?

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16. Would you like to comment on the current South African ECD sector?

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Appendix B

Interview questions: ECD practitioner

PROVINCE ……

SCHOOL ……

TEACHER ……

DATE ……

RESEARCHER ……

1. How long have you been with this center/school?

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2. What background in education and experience in teaching young children do you have? Do you have any qualification(s)?

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3. Are you afforded opportunities to develop yourself professionally? If so, mention these.

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4. Are you afforded any opportunities for collaboration with other teachers?
   How does this impact on your teaching?

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5. What is your center's teaching approach (In what ways do you believe children learn best)? (curriculum)

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6. How do you will handle inappropriate behaviour in the classroom?

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7. In which way(s) do you assess "progress" of children at different ages?
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8. Do you follow any daily schedule? How do you determine the daily activities? Are the days structured? Are they broken up into different classes or does one activity flow into the next?
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9. How do you gauge whether the activities are appropriate for the children's development level?

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10. Describe whether you are able to integrate play time into learning.

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11. Which material/resources are important for your lessons (for teaching)?

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12. How do you encourage learner participation in the classroom? (explanation) - confidence

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13. Do you provide opportunities for partner or small-group collaborative work?
    Describe how you are able to do so, if you do.

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14. How do you encourage the children to learn through exploring?

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15. How do you prepare your three- and four-4-year olds for Grade R?

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16. As an Educare teacher, what challenges do you experience?

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17. How do you support learners who are struggling? (barriers to learning)

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18. How do you deal with the issue of language in teaching and learning?

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19. Briefly describe how the parents get involved in the school activities?

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20. Were you exposed to the ECD National Framework/NELDS? If so, what is your understanding of this document?

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21. Would you like to comment on the existing South African ECD sector?

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