

## Exploring the Roles and Responsibilities of Early Childhood Teachers

Masello Hellen Phajane

Department of Early Childhood development,  
University of South Africa (UNISA), PO Box 392 Pretoria 0003  
Email: phajamh@unisa.ac.za

Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n10p420

### Abstract

*The role and responsibilities of teachers is extremely important to the educational and social growths of children. Teachers are to provide children with the skills and knowledge needed to allow them to learn and use every day functions. While all teachers are extremely important to children learning abilities and what they learn, early childhood education plays a very important role in the growth of children. The study specifically explored the roles and responsibilities of early childhood teachers in the Province of North West in South Africa. A qualitative approach and purposive sampling were used to collect data Maxwell, (2006:33). A total sample of two teachers participated in the study. Observations and focus group interviews were conducted. Recommendations were made to all stakeholders to ensure that there is provision in school environments to enable the Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers to effectively perform their roles and responsibilities to the young ones.*

**Keywords:** roles, responsibilities, early childhood, challenges, children, teachers

### 1. Introduction

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is about programmes for very young children and these are run all over South Africa in homes, community halls, churches, pre-schools, crèches and Foundation Phase Schools, anywhere where providers are doing their best for groups of young children. The word teacher is used to refer to any adult responsible for a group of children in any early childhood program, including infant/toddler caregivers, family child care providers, and specialists in other disciplines who fulfill the role of teacher. Teaching young children is serious work that requires high-quality, dedicated, professional teachers who see the importance of what they do and are eager to increase their effectiveness, knowledge, and skills, Berns, (2004:61).

An early childhood educator is a teacher who works with young children in a classroom setting. This occupation emphasizes two goals of early childhood education (children from infancy to age 5), the focus of academically, socially, emotionally, and physically preparing child during this age range and the focus of protecting and caring for the child in the absence of his/her primary care giver, Fenech, (2007:47). Teachers play an important role in fostering the intellectual and social development of children during their formative years. The education that teachers impart plays a key role in determining the future prospects of their children.

Being an early childhood teacher requires you to be willing to wear many hats; often hold the titles of early childhood professional, early childhood teacher, early childhood educator, early childhood practitioner, early childhood provider, or early childhood caregiver. As an experienced teacher, you are already prepared to be flexible. The following guidelines address five interrelated dimensions of early childhood professional practice: creating a caring community of learners, teaching to enhance development and learning, constructing appropriate curriculum, assessing children's development and learning, and establishing reciprocal relationships with families.

In most cases, your role as an early childhood teacher will be very similar to that of a guide. A guide leads others down new paths. A guide walks beside a person on a journey, not in front. A guide also keeps others safe from harm. As an early childhood teacher, you will be challenged to find new experiences to share with children. Guide children, do not lead them, and move in a direction that interests the child. As a guide, allow the child to choose their learning and playing style while making safety your number one concern! (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, (2007:71). It is now a generally recognised fact that if the child does not receive sufficient nurturing, nutrition, parental/caregivers interaction and positive stimulation during this crucial period, the child may be felt with some developmental deficits that could hamper his/her success in pre-school, kindergarten and beyond Martinez-Beck, (Ed) (2009).

The roles and the responsibility of the teacher is to create a stimulating learning environment, to encourage experimentation, and to guide and extend children's thinking, often using informal questioning or dialogue teaching

strategies. Structure is provided in various ways, but the spatial organization of the environment is usually an important means of structuring the learning situation Estes, (2004:59). Managing a classroom requires organizational skills, attention to detail, and commitment. There are many balls in the air and it is your job to keep them up and moving! (Decker, Decker, Freeman, & Knoop, (2009:20-27), the following guidelines address five interrelated dimensions of early childhood professional practice: creating a caring community of learners, teaching to enhance development and learning, constructing appropriate curriculum, assessing children's development and learning, and establishing reciprocal relationships with families.

Early childhood teachers support learning by providing activities and materials that children find engaging. By facilitating learning, supplying a developmentally appropriate environment, interesting materials, and adequate time to explore, play, and interact, children find learning easy and fun! Martinez-Beck, (2009:23). Early childhood teachers must instruct and nurture without bias in this current system of situations. Teachers must be sensitive to the ever growing diverse population of students within a classroom. Reading, discussing and participating in hands-on multicultural experiences fosters awareness and tolerance for other cultures. Teachers must equip their classrooms in order to create an environment that welcomes all children and their families. Teachers must pay close attention to the cultures represented within their classroom and beyond, Early, Maxwell, Burchinal, Bender, Ebanks, Henry, (2007:558-570).

An early childhood teacher must forthrightly hone his/her skills in promoting parenting knowledge, parenting skills, collaborating with parents in instructional decisions, communicating between home/school, advocating for increased parent involvement. Many early childhood professionals succeed in these areas through newsletters, phone calls, and parent/teacher communication folders, emailing, hosting parent/child activities at school, parent/teacher conferences, parent-focused workshops, and continual, in-service professional development. You should feel comfortable opening up, asking questions, seeking advice, and sharing your experiences. Layzer, & Goodson, (2006:32).

Justice, Mashburn, Hamre & Pianta, (2008:51-68), in today's educational world, parents and families contribute as much as teachers, students, and administrators to the educational process maybe even more. More than any other time in history, involving these community players represents a high priority of most school settings. The measured and researched positive effects of parental involvement on children academic achievement pushes this area into the focus of most school district and early childhood program goals, Berns, (2004:34).

Teaching is full of many responsibilities, roles, and challenges. Like most worthwhile endeavors, it brings both challenges and rewards. Be flexible and you will more readily enjoy the rewards of teaching young children Dooley, (2008:11-20). In most cases, teachers are constrained to their classrooms or schools which prevent them from participating in networking opportunities with other teachers. These constraints, often termed as isolation, translate into a lack of access to supportive professional learning.

In North West teachers face challenges in trying to sustain improvement over time Decker, Freeman, & Knoop, (2009:40). Teachers throughout the country face heavy workloads and increased responsibilities (Sawyer & Kauffman, 2007:53). Teachers are facing challenges daily regarding what to teach and how to teach so that maximum learning is taking place. The challenges are, indeed, daunting. But it is important for us as teachers to be able to assure the public that we know what children should know and when they should know it. As professionals, early childhood teachers must take ownership of the challenges and provide the leadership to make it happen. The early childhood profession is not for the faint of heart or the passive individual. Early childhood teachers are the first line of defence in the teaching and learning of young children. The impact we have today will be felt tomorrow and for generations to come. Hence, our legacy will be revealed

Early childhood teachers face insurmountable challenges in meeting their professional obligations. Aside from the traditional roles and responsibilities that teachers have assumed, they are now expected to serve as curriculum specialists, diagnosticians, health care providers, family counsellors, adult educators, program managers, child development experts, child advocates, mental health specialists, nutrition specialists, and many others too numerous to list, Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, (2006:4).

Teachers need to provide carefully planned curriculum, however, they need to be fully aware of the group of children's individual needs and be ready to adapt the curriculum accordingly to promote optimal learning and development, Layzer & Goodson, (2006:62). In relation to the problem, many early childhood education teachers in South Africa have been faced with the challenge of educating children and documenting evidence for ongoing assessments using individualization strategies while actively supervising the children. Martinez-Beck, (2009:16) challenges that affect the achievement of ECE:

- ❖ Combining universal and targeted programs, ECE is provided at no direct cost to parents. Where available, parent and family support programs have no or modest fees. Few families can find or pay for regulated child care. This fractured funding structure locks participants into their silos, Maxwell, (2006:59).

- ❖ Communication and resources, poor communication with parents, the public and stakeholders leads to a lack of clarity about goals, timelines, roles and responsibilities Coetzee, (2004:27). Inadequate transition planning for agencies affected by systems change disrupts related services and creates opposition, while inadequate resources undermines quality.
- ❖ Staffing, insufficient supports frustrate teachers and administrators who must meet new demands. Justice (2008:55), disparity in remuneration and working conditions among professionals with similar skills and responsibilities, labour contracts and professional regulations all limit the flexibility needed for systems change.
- ❖ Balancing the books Fenech, (2007:68), the recent global recession and slow recovery have pressured governments to deliver programs for significantly lower costs, rolling back integration efforts as each department and agency seeks to protect its own budget and employees.

## 2. Literature Review

To understand how children learn, Clark, Trine Kjørholt, & Moss, (2005:33-40), literature reviewed included the foundational child development theories of Maslow, Erickson, Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, Bandura, Bronfenbrenner, Gardner, and Smilansky. Some of the theorists' accumulative studies, as mentioned above, have evidenced how young children learn. In brief, Maslow described basic needs and learning, Erickson described the emotions and learning, Piaget described logic and reasoning and how children learn, Vygotsky described social interactions and learning, Skinner described behaviour as a function of the environment, Bandura described studies of social learning and motivation, Bronfenbrenner described four types of systems known as the Ecological Systems Theory that impacts the overall development of the child, Gardner described multiple intelligences, and Smilansky described children's play and its relation to learning, Early, Maxwell, Burchinal, Bender, Ebanks, Henry, (2007:580).

DoE Government Gazette South Africa (March 2008) Vol. 513 no: 30880, it is important for classroom teachers to be actively engaged in the children's learning experiences. There is an identified need for an approach that will provide teachers with individualized and meaningful support that is specific to the centers where they work. Therefore, teachers must be provided ongoing professional development opportunities and instructional support. Inventing their practice as they go is significant because teachers are the ones charged with the responsibility for children achievement as well as the implementation methods for doing so DoE, (2008:44). Teachers, like children, are interested in what matters most to them in their present context. They learn from meaningful experiences and benefit from peer collaboration. However, collaboration is a building process that requires time and commitment Brown, Knoche, Edwards, & Sheridan, (2009:482). Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, (2007:20) contend teachers have to find the time to engage in meaningful interactions with their peers and make time for peer observation, reflection, and conversation.

Overall, (2007:106) calls for a framework of action to tackle the challenges of effective early childhood education delivery, although all the highlighted areas of challenges in ECE are crucial to the achievement of the desired goals, the effective delivery aspect will be the focus of this paper. This is because even if all other challenges have been adequately addressed without adequate attention given to the effective delivery system, it may still be difficult if not impossible to achieve the desired goals. It is in this regard that the roles and responsibilities of teachers of the young children become crucial to the success of any ECE programme. As once asserted by Estes (2004:70) early childhood teachers, assume many vital roles and responsibilities as they strive to meet the care and education needs of young children. Early, Maxwell, Burchinal, Bender, Ebanks, Henry, (2007:558-570) roles and responsibilities classified into four major areas:

## 3. Teachers as Caregivers and Nurturers of Children

This includes keeping children safe and protecting them from harm, providing them with their basic survival needs of food, water and shelter as well as providing space for them to move around so that they can develop their large and small muscles. This also includes building relationships which is also done by showing love and affection to the children so that they can feel happy and acceptable in the classroom, talking with and encouraging children of all age to use language and interacting frequently with children showing interest and respect for them.

## 4. Teachers as Facilitators of Learning

This includes providing opportunities and activities that encourage creativity and problem solving in the children, using a variety of teaching strategies and experiences to enhance children's learning and development throughout the day,

providing activities and experiences that encourage children to participate actively and construct their own knowledge and understanding. It also includes taking decisions on books and materials to use, the stories to tell and other things necessary for the development of the whole child.

## 5. Teachers as Observers and Assessors of Children's Development

This role involves the collection and analysis of information to help gain an understanding of children's development and programme effectiveness, using developmentally appropriate observation and assessment instruments and providing objective, accurate, and detailed descriptions of children's behaviours and avoiding subjective comments.

## 6. Teachers as Professional Advocates

That is, taking interest in the professional development of novice educators, taking interest in community-based efforts to promote the wellbeing of children and families, taking interest in personal, professional growth and development by joining professional associations and attending conferences and workshops. It also involves obtaining higher qualifications, appreciating and supporting close ties between the child and the family as well as respecting the dignity, worth and uniqueness of each individual (child, family members and colleagues).

Thus without a clear understanding of the unique dual roles as both childhood careers and teachers, those bestowed with the responsibility of taking care of children may be doing more harm than good. It is very important and necessary therefore for those who are aspiring to become early childhood education teachers in particular to be very familiar with the roles and responsibilities expected of them, Estes (2004:78).

## 7. Research Methodology

In this study, a descriptive qualitative approach was followed to explore on the roles and responsibilities of early childhood teachers in the Province of North West in South Africa. All qualitative research is characterized by the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and inductive investigative strategy, and a richly descriptive end product, McMillan, Schumacher, (2003). A total sample of two teachers participated in the study. Observations and focus group interviews was conducted. The data collected were analysed using descriptive as found appropriate to answer the research question, what are the roles and responsibilities of early childhood teachers in North West Province of South Africa?

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study specifically explored the roles and responsibilities of early childhood teachers in South Africa. The findings of the study revealed that teachers are aware of the roles and responsibilities of ECE as involving care giving and nurturing children, facilitating children's learning, observing and assessing children's development and professional advocacy.

Based on the findings, it is hereby recommended that:

- ❖ Government as the primary duty-bearer accountable for fulfilling, protecting and respecting children's rights should continue to provide materials and financial support to various departments and institutions for the training of ECE teachers in South Africa.
- ❖ Employers of ECE teachers should provide them opportunities for self-improvement to update their knowledge about the developmentally appropriate in ECE.
- ❖ The community, individuals, NGOs, international organizations should collaborate in providing child friendly school environments to enable the ECE teachers to effectively perform their roles and responsibilities to the young ones.

## References

- Berns, R.M., (2004). *Child, Family, School and community. 6<sup>th</sup> edition*. Belmont: Wards worth Thomson.
- Brown, J., Knoche, L. L., Edwards, C. P., and Sheridan, S. M. (2009) Professional development to support parent engagement: A case study of early childhood practitioners. *Early Education and Development* 20, pp. 482–506.
- Clark, A., Trine Kjørholt, A., & Moss, P. (2005). *Beyond listening: Children's perspectives on early childhood services*. Bristol: Policy Press.

- Coetzee, E. (2004). *Theory of education*. Inthuthuko investments: Pretoria.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2007). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care languages of evaluation* (Second edition). London: Routledge.
- Decker, C.A., Decker, J.R., Freeman, N.K. & Knoop, H.T. (2009). *Planning and Administering Early Childhood Programmers 9<sup>th</sup> edition*. New Jersey: Pearson Inc.
- Department of Education Government Gazette South Africa (March 2008) Vol. 513 no: 30880 Foundations of Learning Campaign. Pretoria
- Dooley, H. (2008). Go green and become an Eco-Healthy Child Care program! *Child Care Health Connections* 21(5), 1, 11.
- Early, D. M., Maxwell, K. L., Burchinal, M., Bender, R. H., Ebanks, C. Henry, G. T., (2007) Teachers' education, classroom quality, and young children's academic skills: Results from seven studies of preschool programs. *Child Development* 78, pp. 558-580.
- Estes, L.S. (2004). *Essential of Childcare and Early Childhood Education*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Fenech, M. (2007). *The impact of regulation on quality in long day care in New South Wales: Teachers' perceptions and a critical analysis*. Sydney: Macquarie University.
- DoE, 2008 Foundation for learning conference: Department of Education. South Africa.
- Justice, L. M., Mashburn, A. J., Hamre, B. K., and Pianta, R. C. (2008) Quality of language and literacy instruction in preschool classrooms serving at-risk pupils. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 23, pp. 51-68.
- Layzer, J. I., & Goodson, B. D. (2006). The 'quality' of early care and education settings: Definitional and measurement issues. *Evaluation Review*, 30(5), 556-576.
- Maxwell, L. E. (2006) *Using Environment behaviour research to inform parent education and early childhood caregivers' training programs*. Environmental Design Research Association, Atlanta, GA.
- Martinez-Beck, I. (Ed) (2009). *What we know and don't know about measuring quality in early childhood and school-age care and education settings* (Vol. 12). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families.
- McMillan, J.H., Schumacher's. (2003). *Educational Research. Fundamentals for the consumer* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Overall, L. 2007. *Supporting children's learning: A guide for teaching assistant*. SAGE Publications Inc. London
- Zaslow, M. and Martinez-Beck, I. (eds.) (2006) *Critical issues in early childhood professional development*. Brookes, Baltimore.