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Towards transforming Early Childhood Education in South Africa: Expanding occupational therapy practice for collaborative, population based impact

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Introduction: The occupation of education prepares children for adulthood. Inclusive, equitable, quality education is the right of each child and has the power to end intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. However low early childhood education (ECE) enrolment and poor quality ECE continues to prevail in South Africa particularly for children under five. Occupational Therapists (OTs) are well positioned to address ECE problems on a collaborative, population-based level. The researchers were consulted by an ECE organisation to assist in the development of a more contextually relevant ECE program for the practitioner.

Objectives: Given the importance of the role of ECE practitioners in the provision of any ECE program, and the role OTs can play, this study aimed to identify the needs practitioners have regarding quality in ECE.

Method: A qualitative, descriptive enquiry design was utilised. Data were collected through semi-structured group interviews, with eight practitioners from the identified rural ECE centres, and the ECD coordinator of the ECE organisation.

Results: The findings point out practitioners' biggest challenges and needs along the following six themes: Training, resources, programmes, systems, communication, and policies. These six themes were used to formulate design requirements for the development of a program for children aged 3-5, aligned with the National Curriculum Framework 0-5, which will best support practitioners.

Conclusion: If OTs want to position themselves for impact towards addressing ECE in SA, new approaches, innovative actions, collaborative practice and inter-sectoral investment on a population-based level should be activity pursued.