Tapping into Leadership in Early Childhood Development Centers: Learning from the Lived Experiences of Principals in South African Townships

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Abstract
Leadership is one of the critical drivers of educational institutions and has been overwhelmingly researched across countries. However, there is little with regards to early childhood development centers in the scholarship of educational leadership. South Africa has an assortment of early childhood development centers (ECD) ranging from fully registered and well-resourced centers in affluent areas to less regulated and poorly resourced community-based centers in townships, informal settlements and rural areas. In these centers, there are individuals performing a pivotal role of leading and managing the institutions. In this paper, we hone in on these individuals, specifically in a township setting, whom we refer to as ECD center principals. By means of narrative inquiry methodology, we solicited and interpreted the lived experiences of selected ECD center principals to garner an understanding of what it means to lead an ECD center in a township setting. The paper makes two broad contributions, namely, ECD center principals' self-cognitions and their experiences of leading centers in townships.

Keywords
early childhood development, leadership, servant leadership, self-cognition, identity, narrative inquiry

Introduction and Background
Educational institutions in South Africa may be encapsulated in three categories, namely: pre-school, school, and post-school. The pre-school category is constituted by formal and informal centers, providing early childhood education and care services; these centers are also known as creches. The school category is made up of public and independent schools that provide formal education from a reception grade (grade R) to the final year of schooling (grade 12). The post-school category involves a variety of higher education institutions offering courses and skills development programs; this includes colleges and universities.

In this paper, we focus on the pre-school category, commonly known as early childhood development (ECD). The pre-schools or ECD centers are the first stage of a child’s formal education, and their focus does not solely rest on teaching and learning but also involves a child’s wellbeing and development (Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008). For this reason, leaders and staff in ECD centers are often seen as wearing multiple hats, including hats of a mother, teacher, doctor, advocate, and police in order to meet the needs of children (Douglass, 2018; Kivunja, 2015; McCrea, 2015; Muijs et al., 2004). While all public schools in South Africa are monitored and funded by the government through the Department of Basic Education (Modisaotsile, 2012), ECD centers are regulated and financially supported through the Department of Social Development (DSD). However, this Department only provides financial support (subsidy) to ECD centers upon the satisfaction of stringent registration requirements. Many centers in deprived contexts like townships struggle to satisfy the requirements and are hence not financially supported.

The term township continues to be used even in post-apartheid South Africa to refer to low-cost non-white neighborhoods (Jürgens et al., 2013) located on city peripheries; these houses were designed for black laborers during the apartheid era to keep them closer to their places of employment in cities and towns (Jürgens et al., 2013; Mampane & Bouwer, 2011). Although townships are characterized by high rates of unemployment, poverty, crime, and violence,
among other things (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011), some individuals in these areas realize that a child’s early exposure to education has a positive bearing on the physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, social, and moral development of their children (Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008). Thus, these individuals initiate and lead ECD centers in township communities.

The scholarship on educational leadership shows leadership as an imperative factor in every educational institution (Bush, 2007). However, scarcity with regards to leadership in ECD centers is still noticeable (Atmore, 2013; Fourie, 2018). Principals leading these centers in township communities hold interesting but unknown experiences that are worth unveiling. Therefore, the narrative inquiry reported herein solicited and analyzed the lived experiences of selected ECD center principals in township communities to understand what it means to lead an ECD center in South African townships. To generate this understanding, we ask two questions, namely:

- What are the principals’ cognitions of their role in ECD centers located in township communities?
- What are the principals’ experiences of leading ECD centers located in township communities?

**Leadership in the Field of Early Childhood Development**

ECD centers, also known as pre-schools or early care and education programs in other contexts, play a crucial and formidable role of tending and safeguarding the most precious commodity of every nation, young children (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). A key leader in these centers is a principal, also known as a director of early care and education or preschool leader in other contexts. Although leadership is an essential factor in achieving quality in most educational institutions, research on leadership in ECD centers has been scanty (Wise & Wright, 2012), and is dominated by studies conducted in developed countries, such as the United States of America, Japan, Finland, Turkey, and Singapore (Cevher-Kalburan, 2014; Davis, 2014; Hujala, 2013; Retas & Kwan, 2000).

The work of ECD principals has been interpreted differently by different scholars; however, parallels may be drawn from these interpretations. Kagan and Hallmark (2001), who provide a depth evaluation of leadership in ECD centers describe the work of ECD principals around five leadership facets: community leadership, pedagogical leadership, administrative leadership, advocacy leadership, and conceptual leadership. Firstly, ECD centers are located in communities; therefore, the agenda for promoting the health and welfare of children and families should be embraced by the whole community (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001; McCrea, 2015). Principals of ECD centers, among other things, need to be involved in communities, relate with funders, and define a vision of a center in a way that most community members can embrace (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). Secondly, ECD principals are pedagogical leaders; this involves interpreting research and theory, disseminating new information to teachers and parents, and identifying and focusing attention on knowledge gaps that need to be filled (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). Pedagogical leadership is also identified by Hujala (2013) as a critical role of ECD principals, involving functions such as the promotion of educational objectives, monitoring syllabi, and decision making.

Thirdly, Kagan and Hallmark (2001) perceive ECD centers as businesses that provide service to children, families, and communities. They then suggest that these centers should be managed like any other business (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). Therefore, ECD center principals need to take on an administrative leadership role and deal with budgeting, personnel, staff development, community, and family outreach and planning among other things (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). Fourthly, ECD center principals must exercise advocacy leadership that is based on long term planning and forward-thinking about the field of ECD; this should take into account the public policy, business policy and legislative initiatives (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). Finally, ECD principals must be conceptual leaders who consider ECD reform within a broader social change, as it is linked to other reform and social movements. These leaders should forge links with power sources in communities and in the field (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001).

**Drawbacks of Leadership in ECD Centers**

There are multiple drawbacks for leadership in ECD centers; these include the level of educational qualifications, professional development, low salaries, and lack of career pathing. Firstly, the level of educational qualifications for ECD personnel is not regulated. Writing from the American context, Wise and Wright (2012) make a comparison between public schools and pre-schools; they explain that on the one hand, the minimum qualification for a public school principal or assistant principal is a master’s degree in education, on the other hand, pre-school leaders typically have no such requirement. Similarly, in South Africa there is no prerequisite qualification for teaching in and leading an ECD center. The ECD center principals’ level of education may have a direct bearing on the success of centers; Talan et al. (2014) confirm that principals’ ability to attract and retain effective teachers, establish norms of continuous quality improvement and oversee the center is directly related to their level of formal education, experience, and specialized training.

Secondly, the lack of training is a cause for concern. Many ECD center principals assume their roles without prior training (Muijs et al., 2004; Talan et al., 2014; Whitebook et al., 2012; Wise & Wright, 2012); some were moved by passion, while in some cases other people would have seen their leadership ability and then encouraged them to pursue the role.
Given the emerging literature suggesting the complexity of ECD leadership roles (Douglass, 2018; Fourie, 2018; Gotvassli, 2018; Phillips, 2017), training of ECD leaders is essential. Administrative training in America has proved to improve ECD leaders’ level of competence significantly, and staff in their centers reported that the work environment has become more positive and productive (Talan et al., 2014).

Thirdly, the low salary is another drawback for ECD leaders. The value of any occupation is measured through the salary; if it is sophisticated, the position will be respected (Wise & Wright, 2012). Unfortunately, the opposite is true for ECD principals, who are the lowest paid when compared to leaders in other educational institutions (Wise & Wright, 2012). The salary drawback severely affects the ECD field; it impedes centers from attracting qualified personnel. Finally, there is no career path in the ECD field. Unlike public schools, where a principal will have a position of a departmental head or deputy principal before taking on the principalship role, in the ECD field, a teacher can become a principal with a limited or no training and experience (Wise & Wright, 2012). This may pose a threat to ECD leaders’ confidence and self-efficacy.

**Servant Leadership: A Conceptual Framework**

The concept of servant leadership gained traction following the seminal work of Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s. Originally, Greenleaf held the idea that the role of a servant and that of a leader may be fused in one person (a servant leader) (Greenleaf, 1977). In his definition, he distinguishes between a servant leader and a non-servant leader; he perceives a servant leader as a servant first, rather than a leader first (Greenleaf, 1977). He goes on to say, becoming a servant leader begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, then a conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead, unlike a person who is a leader first because of the need to assure an unequal power drive or to acquire material possessions, who then later makes a choice to serve (Greenleaf, 1977).

Over the years, the servant leadership notion attracted the attention of several scholars and has subsequently generated multiple interpretations. Many of these interpretations are inspired by Greenleaf, and they center on a leader-follower relationship (Crippen, 2004; Graham, 1991; Russell & Gregory Stone, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011). For instance, Graham (1991) defines servant leadership as a leader-follower relationship that focuses on the ideal of service wherein a leader models service by humbly serving the led, rather than expecting to be served. In this way, followers of a servant-leader are inspired to become servants themselves (Graham, 1991). In a similar vein, Russell and Gregory Stone (2002) also explain that servant leadership takes place when leaders take the position of a servant in their relationship with fellow workers. The servant leaders place service at the core instead of power, Russell and Gregory Stone (2002) claim that, even though power will always be associated with leadership, it should have one legitimate use, namely: service. van Dierendonck (2011) further elaborates the role of power and use thereof in the context of servant leadership; he claims that power is a possibility to serve and a prerequisite for servant leaders. This scholar looks at serving and leading as exchangeable, because being a servant allows a person to lead, and being a leader implies a person serves (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Given the lack of a precise definition of servant leadership, scholars provide a wide range of characteristics to describe the behaviors of servant leaders. In this paper, we aligned ourselves with the characteristics espoused by van Dierendonck (2011) to understand the leadership role of the participating ECD center principals. van Dierendonck (2011) assessed multiple sets of characteristics of servant leaders in the literature and realized that there are commonalities among these sets; he then compressed these characteristics and formulated six key characteristics. According to van Dierendonck (2011), servant-leaders empower and develop people; they show humility, are authentic, accept people for who they are, provide direction, and are stewards who work for the good of the whole.

In the inquiry reported in this paper, the servant leadership concept framed our understanding during our engagement with the lived experiences of ECD center principals in township communities. We drew on van Dierendonck’s (2011) characteristics of servant leadership to examine the behavior of these principals in their centers.

**Methodology**

The experiences of ECD center principals were explored within the interpretivist paradigm. This research paradigm postulates that individuals develop subjective meanings of their personal experiences, and this results in multiple truths (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2013). Thus, the experiences of participating ECD center principals in this paper were understood as subjective interpretations of the world around them (Creswell, 2013).

In terms of methodology, we adopted narrative inquiry, which is a way of inquiring into individuals’ experiences narratively, over time and in context (Caine et al., 2013; Clandinin, 2013). This methodology pays attention to three commonplaces that guide researchers’ engagements with peoples’ experiences. The first commonplace is *temporality*: this refers to attending to the past, present, and future of participants. The second commonplace is *sociality*: this refers to attending to a person’s personal conditions and social conditions concurrently. The personal conditions involve their feelings, hopes, desires, and so on, while the social conditions refer to settings under which people’s experiences unfold, such as cultural, social, institutional, familial, and linguistic settings. The third commonplace is...
place, which refers to the physical boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry takes place (Clandinin, 2013). In our study these commonplaces constituted our thinking tool during the generation and analysis of field texts (known as data in conventional methodologies); in this way, we were able to attend to temporality, sociality and place in our engagements with participants and the field texts (Blose, 2019).

The narrative inquiry methodology places prominence on storytelling and perceives an experience as a narrative composition; as a result, thinking narratively about experiences is crucial when undertaking narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013). In alignment with this notion, field texts in this study were generated through a narrative method known as a narrative interview. This is a key field text generation method that grants participants an opportunity to relate their stories of experiences freely (Adler & Clark, 2008; Clandinin, 2013; Olive, 2014). To this end, two sessions of interviews were arranged with each of the ECD center principals. In these sessions, we requested the principals to freely relate their experiences of leading ECD centers in a township; and where clarity was needed, it was solicited. The participants in this study were selected purposively on the basis that they are serving as principals in ECD centers and had been in this role for at least 5 years. In addition, the convenient sampling method was also applied to select ECD principals from close proximity. As a result, three ECD principals leading centers in township communities were selected to participate in this inquiry. One of these principals is leading an ECD center in KwMashu township, and the other two principals are leading ECD centers in Umlazi township; these townships were accessible to us (researchers). To ensure confidentiality, we gave pseudonyms to the participating ECD principals, and we refer to them as Mary, Janet, and Stella.

The field texts generated from Mary, Janet, and Stella were analyzed using two methods: narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. First, the narrative analysis involved organizing field text elements of each ECD principal into a coherent and chronological account using plots that captured episodes of participants’ experiences. This process engendered re-storied narratives of Mary, Janet, and Stella (Polkinghorne, 2002); we refer to these narratives as re-storied because they were first told by the participants as field texts, and were later, organized and retold coherently by researchers as research texts (Clandinin, 2013). Although we do not present the re-storied narratives of Mary, Janet, and Stella in this paper, we make reasonable extractions from their narratives in the presentation of findings.

Second, the analysis of narratives involved the examination of Mary, Janet, and Stella’s re-storied narratives to identify particular instances or themes to provide answers to the research questions (Polkinghorne, 2002). The themes that emerged from this process are discussed as findings in the following section.

Brief Profiles of Participants

Below we present brief accounts of participants and their ECD centers.

Mary

Mary is a pseudonym given to the first participant; she is a woman at the age of 55 years. She holds a certificate in ECD. Her journey to become an ECD leader began while she was a housewife; she invited children from her neighborhood to her house and read bible stories. The community members liked Mary’s initiative, and they subsequently convinced her to start a crèche. One of the neighbors introduced Mary to a pastor whose church had enough space; the pastor opened the church’s doors. Mary started the crèche in March 2013 with only five children; the enrollment shot up to 35 children at the end of the same month. She believes that the word of God is key to everything in life. Given her Christianity background, Mary incorporates Christianity teachings into educational themes to set up the teaching program for her ECD center.

Janet

Janet is a pseudonym given to the second participant; she is a woman at the age of 52 years. Janet held a diploma in ECD and was previously employed as a grade R teacher in a well-off pre-school in town. In 1995, Janet was approached by an old lady from her township who was opening a creche and needed Janet’s assistance. Janet resigned from her job and joined the old lady. Although the old lady started the creche, Janet was made the principal because of her knowledge and experience. Presently, Janet’s center has three teachers; one for the 2-year-old group of 11 children, another teacher for the 3-year-old group of 25 children and one teacher for the 4-year-old of 27 children. Janet feels obliged to serve children, staff and parents in the community, and she subscribes to Ubuntu philosophy “Umuntu, umuntu ngabantu,” which means “I am because we are.”

Stella

Stella is a pseudonym given to the third participant; she is a woman at the age of 61 years. She holds a diploma in ECD. Stella was previously an ECD center principal of a very successful center in Umlazi township; this center had nine members of staff and more than 100 children. Stella left this center and worked for the Department of Social Development as an inspector of ECD centers. In 2014, she left the Department of Social Development and again pioneered an ECD center; currently, the center has three staff members and 40 children. Stella’s vision is to produce school ready children; to this end, her center strives to train children holistically.
Findings

This section is divided into two sub-sections to provide answers to the two research questions. The first sub-section presents principals’ cognitions of their role in ECD centers, while the second sub-section discusses principals’ experiences of leading ECD centers in townships.

**Principals’ Cognitions of Their Role in ECD centers Located in Townships**

Regarding the principals’ self-cognitions of their role, two themes emerged from their re-storied narratives, namely, exercising passion-driven leadership and being a community servant. These themes are discussed below:

**Exercising Passion Driven Leadership**

The passion for childcare and love for children seem to play a vital role in the work of Mary, Janet and Stella. Their narratives show that they did set up the centers not because of unemployment, but because of the desire to work with children. Below, Mary explains how she started her center and operated from a church where she initially taught bible lessons:

*I love children, and they are close to my heart. I started my ECD centre with only five kids, and I operated from a community church. I relied on my own experience of raising a daughter; and I used my skills and knowledge to conduct bible lessons, and recite verses and poems to teach children in my little crèche. At that time, we did not have a name for the crèche, and I do not know how the enrolment grew from five to thirty-five within a year. Seeing that the enrolment was improving, I then visited the Training and Resource in Early Education (TREE), an organisation that specialises in ECD resources and training. I received some training and essential curriculum-related resources.*

The passion for children saw Janet resigning from her job to collaborate with her neighbor in setting up an ECD center. She articulates:

*I hold a strong passion for children, and I am a hard worker. These two qualities made my previous employer promote me from teaching in the pre-school section to teach grade R [a school reception class]. I made a huge decision of leaving my previous employer and collaborated with Martha, a retired teacher in pioneering an ECD centre in our community. In 1996, we approached a church and solicited permission to use its facilities. We were granted the permission and the Magic ECD centre was born. When we started, we only had six children; the rest is history.*

Church facilities play a pivotal role in the existence of ECD centers in townships. Stella’s love for children was noted by her neighbor and she was offered space at a church in the community. She explains:

*My love for children dates back. I remember in my early years of marriage, I used to sit and tell stories to children of my neighbourhood. I would cook food and invite them to come and eat. I was not aware that my neighbours were observing all this. At one stage, one of the neighbours approached me and told me that they would like me to start a crèche at their church. I took this opportunity with both hands. There were two of us who were handpicked, and I was made the principal of the centre. The church had a big yard and classes were huge. As a result, we had more than one hundred children within a period of less than two years.*

The three participating ECD center principals started their centers from scratch and had no property; they operated from church facilities. Across these participants, passion for children emerges as their key driver. The statements such as “I love children and they are close to my heart,” “I hold a strong passion for children . . .” and “My love for children dates back.” show that Mary, Janet and Stella’s work is underpinned by a strong desire to work with children. The passion-driven stance displayed by these leaders is suitable for ECD centers, where care for children is paramount. Siraj and Hallet (2014) postulate that the ethic of care should underpin practitioners and leaders working in children centers. The participating ECD center principals did not undergo training in preparation for the role of leading their centers; they were moved by passion (Muijs et al., 2004). Although Janet had the experience of working in a preschool, it cannot be equated to formal training. These leaders’ desire for child care makes them what van Dierendonck (2011) calls stewards who work for the good of the whole.

**Community servants**

ECD centers provide an essential service needed in every community. From the narratives of Mary, Janet, and Stella, we learn that the work of ECD center principals in township communities involves the nurturing of children physically, psychologically, and socially. These leaders achieve this by assuming the role of a servant, and they serve children, parents and staff. Given that children, parents and staff are community constituents, it is safe to identify the ECD center principals as community servants. For instance, Mary perceives her role as a response to the challenges of the community, and she has packaged her services such that she fills gaps in the community. She expounds:

*I see myself as a servant to my community. My clientele is mostly young mothers who offer less attention to their children at the expense of fashion and entertainment. Some children live with grandparents who are surviving on a government grant. For this reason, I decided to provide meals at the centre, and this includes breakfast, morning snack, and lunch. I do this to balance and nourish children’s health. Children deserve fresh vegetables, fresh fruits and hot cooked meals every day.*

The community servant identity was also observable in Janet, who feels obligated to serve her community. She explains:
As a principal, I am obliged to serve children, staff and parents in the community; I make sure that children are safe and their needs are met. It is my responsibility to ensure that the ECD environment is child friendly. In the past few years, I realised that some of our children’s parents return from work very late; thus, I introduced the aftercare service. This venture created job opportunities for unemployed parents in the community. The centre now opens at 07h30 and teaching ends at 13h30. The aftercare service then begins at 14h00 and finishes at 17h00.

Echoing similar sentiments is Stella, who gets her hands dirty by partaking in all activities in her center. She reports that:

I do not have an office at the centre since I am everywhere at any given time. My mission is to serve my community, children and teachers. Therefore, I need to be able to do everything in the centre, including teaching. Parents, teachers and children look up to me because I am at their service. Therefore, I need to deliver; be it service, encouragement, support or security.

In the above extracts, we see Mary, Janet, and Stella embracing an identity of community servant. They serve their communities by providing an essential service of nurturing and protecting children. Although the participating principals operate in a disadvantaged context, they go all out to ensure that the needs of children are catered for. These leaders understand that children are the most precious commodity of the nation; thus, they play a crucial and formidable role of nurturing and safeguarding them (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). Mary, Janet, and Stella do not only serve children, but they also serve the community. For instance, they show that they are acquainted with challenges of their communities, including poor parenting by young parents, parents who return from work very late, and unemployment; thus they make attempts to mitigate the impact of these challenges.

The narratives of Janet, Mary, and Stella show that they wanted to serve their communities more than anything. This position resonates with Greenleaf’s (1977) definition of a servant leader as someone who is a servant first rather than a leader first. These leaders live and operate in townships, where the rate of unemployment, poverty, crime and violence is high (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011); still, these issues do not extinguish their desire to serve their communities. Upon examining their narrative and their work in township communities, we identified qualities of servant leadership. According to Greenleaf (1977), becoming a servant-leader begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, then a conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. This resonates with the responses of these principals, who were not even trained for the work they do but are driven by the desire to serve their communities.

**Principals’ Experiences of Leading ECD Centers in Township Communities**

Upon examining the re-storied narratives of Mary, Janet, and Stella, three essential experiences emerged; these experiences are presented below:

**The plight of registration requirements and lack of support**

It was apparent that these centers do not meet all the registration requirements by the Department of Social Development and thus they do not receive financial support from the Department. The absence of financial support puts the full budget of centers in the hands of these principals who then need to fend for themselves. Mary expounds her plight, and survival means:

I am not receiving any support from the Department of Social Development, because they require us to meet all registration requirements before they provide support. Although my centre is registered by the DSD, she finds herSELF in a different situation.

I am not receiving subsidy or any form of support from the Department of Social Development, because they require us to meet all registration requirements before they provide support. Although my centre is registered with the DSD, it falls short on some of their requirements. Therefore, I do not qualify for the government grant. The Department reported that the building is old and they recommended that I close down the centre or find another place.

Stella perceives the DSD’s registration requirements as a mission that she cannot achieve in the near future. She elaborates:

I do not remember receiving any support from the DSD since I opened this facility. To me, they seem not keen to know what is happening in this centre; hence they rarely visit us. From their visits, I established that their concern is not about children; instead, their primary concern is whether or not the centre complies with their requirements. At present, my centre does not meet their registration requirements, and I don’t see us meeting them soon. However, the service I am rendering to the community is significant, and I think they should consider helping me regardless of the registration requirements. Every child has a right to education, but seemingly the Department is going against this constitutional goal. I wish the Department of Basic Education absorbs all ECD centres; maybe then our learners’ educational needs and those of ECD teachers would be addressed.

While Janet’s center is registered by the DSD, she finds herself between a rock and a hard place as her center operates from church premises. On the one hand, the DSD wants full control of the center’s finances; on the other hand, the church in which the center is located claims total financial management of the center. She explicates:

The centre falls under the DSD; however, we do not qualify for teachers’ stipends. The DSD wants total control over our finances to pay stipends to teachers, and unfortunately, the church also claims the centre. It has assigned our financial books to the church’s financial officer. Therefore, we are not receiving any financial support from the DSD, while there is very little that the church does for us.

From the above extracts, it appears that ECD center principals’ main frustration is the lack of support from the government. In South Africa, the recognized government authority
over ECD centers is the Department of Social Development. Mary and Stella would like to get their centers to be fully recognized by the DSD to access support. However, the registration requirements are excessive. They include, among other things, firm building structures, children friendly toilets, clean running water and safe playing fields. Considering South African townships, setting up an ECD center with all these facilities, without any support is not always practical. Although the DSD fully recognizes Janet’s center based on the church’s property, still, the church could not give away the full control of its property to the government.

Judging from the narratives of Mary, Janet, and Stella, it appears that they have lost hope in the DSD and have decided to focus their attention elsewhere. This is evident in Mary’s utterances “Considering the centre’s financial standing, renovations are unfortunately a plight beyond our reach.” and Stella’s “At present my centre does not meet their registration requirements, and I don’t see us meeting their requirements soon.” Although these leaders have been discouraged by the registration requirements, the provision of child care and development remains a priority. Stella’s words that “the service I am providing to the community is significant” and “every child has a right to education” reveal that she looks at ECD within a broader social change (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). Again, Mary’s effort to register her center as a non-profit organization to solicit donations shows her ability to forge links with power sources in the community and the field (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001).

Harnessing material, and designing and leading learning program

The re-storied narratives of the participating principals show that they work tirelessly to ensure that learning occurs in their centers. Given that their centers are not fully regulated, Mary, Janet, and Stella could have decided to craft informal learning programs. Still, they chose to adopt the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) as an underpinning of the learning program in their centers. By adopting the NCF, these ECD center principals ensure that their offerings match those of fully regulated and well off centers. Mary explains her experience:

I visited the organisation known as training resources in early education (TREE), to solicit assistance in terms of curriculum. TREE is an organisation that specialises in ECD resource and training. They gave me resources, including, a theme book and the NCF document, among other things. Following this visit, I sat down with my practitioners and crafted our learning programme from these documents. My job as a leader is to continuously monitor practitioners’ implementation of the learning programme to ensure effectiveness.

Janet finds the designing of learning program much challenging, given that her staff are unskilled. Although she has been able to harness necessary material, she finds designing, application and supervision of learning program taxing on her side. She elucidates:

Designing and leading learning programme is a crucial duty I perform as an ECD centre principal. Central to this duty is the view of quality, which means that our learning programme should meet the purpose of our existence in this township. I once attended a beneficial workshop by an organisation called Unlimited Child; it is in this workshop where I got the NCF documents. The designing of learning programme requires the involvement of stakeholders; in my case, practitioners are not skilled in ECD and parents are less interested in our programmes; as a result, the bulk of work remains in my hands. Apart from this, I still need to work closely with practitioners to evaluate and assess the implementation of the learning programmes. Thus, I find this function very stressful and overwhelming.

While Janet is overwhelmed, Stella could forge team working in her center, thereby lessening the burden. Stella was able to obtain the curriculum documents, which underpin her design of the learning program. Although she perceives this task complex, working with her team makes it doable. Stella explains:

Our vision as a centre is to produce learners who are school-ready; therefore, we strive to train them holistically. To achieve this, I searched for and acquired the Theme book and the NCF document, and I use these documents in designing and leading learning programme in my centre. I always promote team working to my staff; in this way, practitioners feel motivated to participate in the design of learning programmes.

The ECD centers are educational institutions; therefore, one of the critical roles performed by principals in these institutions is pedagogical leadership (Hujala, 2013; Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). This role, according to Hujala (2013), involves functions such as the promotion of educational objectives, monitoring syllabus, and decision making. Drawing from participants’ narratives, we learn that they understand the critical need for pedagogical leadership and are making an effort toward performing this role, even though their centers are not formally recognized. Given the lack of recognition, Mary, Janet and Stella do not receive any curricular documentation from any authority, and there is less inspection. As a result, they took it upon themselves to harness curricular material which they subsequently interpreted to design a learning program for their centers. The promotion of the improvement of teaching and learning is the most important role played by ECD leaders (Siraj & Hallet, 2014).

Janet, Mary, and Stella appear to be concerned about the quality of service they render to their communities. The acts of harnessing curricula and underpinning their learning program on the NCF, show commitment to authenticity. Additionally, Mary, Janet, and Stella guide and monitor practitioners, some of whom are unskilled, and by so doing, are skilling them. According to van Dierendonck (2011), servant-leaders empower and develop people; they show humility, are authentic, accept people for who they are, provide direction, and are stewards who work for the good of the whole. These characteristics were observable from Janet,
Mary and Stella’s role of harnessing, leading and designing learning programs in their ECD centers.

**Leading with minimal resources**

The participating ECD principals play a pivotal role in township communities; however, the conditions under which they work are challenging. Given that many parents residing in townships do not earn much, the ECD principals charge low fees and centers primarily rely on this meager income. The inadequacy of financial resources has a direct bearing on all other resources in a center, including educational tools, children’s meals as well as human resources and salaries. Mary relates how she survives with limited resources in her center:

_The lack of resources is the greatest challenge I have in my ECD centre. Children’s fees are pegged very low to accommodate parents who do not earn much. Unfortunately, this has a bearing on our centre because the fees we collect are not enough to cover all our expenses. In our last year’s annual general meeting, I proposed a raise in fees to R550 per month inclusive of food, registration and stationery; because our expenses were surpassing our income. I was very excited when parents accepted our proposal, although it is still a battle for some parents to pay. As a result, fundraising becomes necessary to make ends meet, and I do everything within my power to secure the little that I can so that the centre continues to run despite all limitations._

Again, Janet expressed her experience in terms of lack of resources, and she avers that essentials such as educational tools, human resources and salaries are not enough in her center:

_The lack of teaching and learning resources is a huge crisis in our context. We need indoor and outdoor toys as well as resources for our learning activities. We use a lot of paper, paint and crayons; children’s stationery is not enough to cater for all learning activities. We have engaged in recycling of materials such as empty toilet rolls, plastic bottles and bottle tops as well as cereal boxes. … If resources were allowing, we would have two teachers per age group class, but with the monthly fee we currently charge per child, we struggle to pay even the existing staff._

Stella echoes similar sentiments as she laments the inadequacy of resources and the impact thereof in her center. She expands:

_We have a crisis, and our learners deserve nothing less. There are many challenges we face on a daily basis because our environment is not safe. We are living in Umlazi township, and many parents in this community are not working, while the few that are working do not earn much. Therefore, we charge a very low fee per child, but still, our clients struggle to pay. Right now, we are at the verge of collapsing the feeding aspect of the centre, but still, parents will not afford to pack lunch boxes for their children every day. Teachers’ salaries are not constant every month because of fees which are not paid on time. Teachers’ retention is tough due to wage uncertainty. We cannot hire qualified practitioners since we cannot afford them. I have learnt to live one day at a time, and I am satisfied if children are happy._

The shortage of financial resources in township ECD centers is a contextual reality that principals grapple with year in and year out. Many parents in township communities are not financially fit; therefore, ECD centers may only charge low fees to serve these communities. The fees that Mary, Janet and Stella collect are the primary source of income, and for this reason, their ECD centers survive on very low budgets. Against the backdrop of low budgets, these leaders appear to be resilient; they still find ways to keep their centers afloat with limited funds. Mary proposed a little rise in fees to parents, Janet promotes recycling, and Stella considers cutting out the feeding aspect in her center. These responses show humility, ability to accept people for who they are and also a desire to empower and develop people; these are some of the characteristics of servant leaders (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Besides, these experiences confirm the emerging debate in the literature that the ECD leadership role is complex (Douglass, 2018; Fourie, 2018; Gotvassli, 2018; Phillips, 2017). Although Mary, Janet and Stella are surviving amid limited financial resources, training in administrative leadership could enhance their responses to this challenge. The training would not only help them in managing finances but also in devising efficient fundraising strategies in a disadvantaged context. Kagan and Hallmark (2001) suggest that ECD centers should be treated as businesses and principals in these centers need to take on the role of administrative leadership, which involves budgeting and personnel management among other things.

**Discussion**

The study reported in this paper brought to light two key characteristics of the principals leading ECD centers in South African townships: passion-driven leadership and being a community servant. The passion came across as a source of strength that propelled the ECD center principals in their endeavor to provide childcare in township communities. The ECD centers in these communities are unsophisticated institutions that lacked even land, hence they used church properties. In addition, practitioners and principals in these centers receive meager salaries, as the centers do not qualify for the government subsidy. Given these complexities, the principals’ assertions that they hold a passion for working with children were justifiable.

The participating ECD center principals conceive themselves as servants in their communities. Their primary objective is to provide childcare; however, their narratives revealed their awareness of contextual realities such as poor parenting, unemployment, and parents’ late return from work. Thus they respond to the needs of their communities by availing
themselves and the centers to contribute to the mitigation of these challenges. Such commitments reflect a desire to serve, which is a characteristic of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). These leaders show a desire for child care and also willingness to serve their communities through child care. According to van Dierendonck (2011), servant leaders empower and develop people, show humility, accept people for who they are and are stewards who work for the good of the whole; these qualities are in harmony with the expressed identities of the participating ECD center principals.

Apart from self-cognitions, the study also identified three fundamental principals’ experiences of leading ECD centers in townships. Firstly, the principals experienced a plight of registration requirements and a lack of support. This appeared to be the main frustration for the ECD principals in townships. For an ECD center to be registered in South Africa, it has to satisfy an excessive list of requirements, which some may not be easily met in disadvantaged contexts such as townships. The centers led by the principals who participated in this study were not fully registered and are not receiving any support from the DSD; indeed, they have lost hope in the DSD. Secondly, the participating principals engaged in harnessing materials, and designing and leading learning programs. These principals voluntarily chose to align the learning program in their centers to the NCF, even though their centers operated informally. To this end, the principals took it upon themselves to harness the NCF documentation or guidelines and then interpreted these to develop their learning programs. They also had to monitor the application of the learning program closely, given that some of their practitioners are unskilled. Thirdly, the principals who participated in this study led their centers with minimal resources. The ECD centers in townships charged low fees due to the socio-economic status of their clients, and as a result, the centers survived on low budgets. The limited budget constrained the principals from securing resources such as enough teaching resources, adequate playing equipment, enough food for children, and qualified practitioners.

Drawing from the above discussion, it is apparent that principals’ experiences of leading ECD centers in townships have been unpleasant. However, they are not consumed by these experiences; instead, their drive to provide childcare to their communities surpasses the unpleasant experiences. The participating ECD center principals came across as servant leaders who empower and develop people, who show humility, who are authentic, who accept people for who they are, who provide direction, and are stewards who work for the good of the whole (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Conclusion

Educational leadership has been perceived as an imperative factor in every educational institution (Bush, 2007; Wise & Wright, 2012). Given the noticeable scarcity of scholarship on leadership in ECD centers, this study sought to understand what it means to lead ECD centers in South African townships. The multiple challenges faced by these principals include lack of support from government departments, lack of training for the role, having unskilled or under-skilled staff, lack of regulation, the low fees they charge and the lack of or poor resources in their facilities. Given these challenges, we conclude that leading ECD centers in township communities is a complex task. Against the backdrop of this complexity, the participating principals are not derailed from providing child care services; instead, their passion for childcare and a desire to serve their communities keep them going.

This was a small-scale qualitative inquiry that engaged with the lived experiences of principals to understand what it means to lead ECD centers in South African townships. While its findings may not reflect the overall views of ECD center principals across South African townships, the intention is to provoke scholarly debate on the leadership in ECD centers, particularly in South Africa. Early child development, which is children’s constitutional right, is essential across communities; however, access to this vital service appears to be inequitably shaped by the socio-economic status of communities. We see a need for more research on ECD centers and leadership thereof in townships, and we recommend to the DSD and the Department of Basic Education to closely look into the offering of early childhood development across communities.

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