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Working with adults towards systemic change to meet learners' needs at various phases of education

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Abstract

In this article, we report on three recent research studies conducted in Eastern Cape school settings, to motivate for changes that are possible within the system to better meet learners' needs. Beginning with a recognition of the diverse and extensive needs of learners in this challenging and very inequitable context, we describe systemic challenges. Although the studies each had different emphases in different phases of education, we drew from aspects of the bioecological systems model based on the constructivist paradigm. Using interventionist and qualitative methods in each study, we worked collaboratively alongside educators, parents, and district officials to explore possibilities for changes in practice. In the first study, we highlight the challenges in the system for learners with special educational needs, from the perspectives of different stakeholders, illustrated in a complex eco-systemic diagram. This is followed by two action research-based case studies: a parent - practitioner partnership trialled in an Early Childhood Development centre to promote parental involvement and communication with educators; and one that illustrates a collaborative intervention with educators in the Further Education and Training phase, focused on career education in Life Orientation. Each of the projects demonstrates the need for interactions between people in the educational system, given the difficulties faced by individual practitioners at systemic levels. Two case studies provide examples that link adults in the systems

(parents with educators and educators from different schools). The common emergent themes evidence the potential for beneficial changes through partnership working, building on people's combined knowledge of local contexts and circumstances, and using bottom-up collaboration.

Keywords: bioecological systems model, collaborative action research, South African education case studies, Early Childhood Development partnerships, foundation-phase special educational needs, Life Orientation career education

Introduction

After three decades of democracy, the state of South African education is still characterised by persistent and stark inequalities (Spaull, 2019), that lead to the failure to meet the needs of many diverse learners. The legacies of racial and spatial apartheid still persist and are now complicated additionally by class and socio-economic differences (Vally, 2020). Post-1994 education policies established a legislative framework that had the potential to enable greater social justice, through the incorporation of policies of inclusive education (following global trends). These policies were designed to provide equal quality education for all, including those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and learners with special educational needs (LSEN), to reach their potential (Smit et al., 2020). However, the neoliberal dominance of ideology and economics over the past two decades has led to continued inequitable distribution of resources and demotivated educators, with widespread lack of support for learners with barriers to learning (Engelbrecht et al., 2015), as well as inadequate education to equip learners for post-school economic participation. Learners thus exit school with inadequate preparation and the term "skills shortages" is often given as a key reason for the persistence of poverty, inequality, and unemployment (Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016). However, this is a narrow view that locates the problem within individuals and does not consider many of the systemic factors that contribute to high levels of unemployment (Vally & Motala, 2014), especially among youth.

The complexities of aspects of the education system and its resistance to change are particularly evident in the Eastern Cape province, where the need for educational reform is evident in many of the metrics of performance (Spaull, 2019). As one of nine provinces (and the second largest) created in 1994, the Eastern Cape emerged from the fusion of parts of the previous Cape province with two former Bantustans, the Transkei and Ciskei as Evans (2014) has reminded us, through which the apartheid government had established indirect rule. The socio-economic situation of the province reflects extensive rural poverty (some of which is a legacy of the apartheid system of under-development), with it being regularly listed among the three poorest provinces (Moyo et al., 2022). It is characterised by high unemployment rates, with substantial numbers of residents, including high percentages of the elderly and people dependent on state welfare social grants in rural areas. Governmental systems are characterised as delivering services inadequately, with municipalities described as "failing miserably because of capacity limitations, complacency and incapacity" (Ngumbela 2021, p.2). This pattern is replicated in schools, with a generally inefficient system of provincial

governance, a weak track record of meeting learners' needs, and poor management functions, all of which impact negatively on the quality of education and the retention of learners in schools, leading to learners having lower than the average number of years in school and depressed educational attainment (Moyo et al., 2022). In such circumstances, where the systems do not respond to learners' needs and systems-level policy interventions have had very limited effects, it is necessary to search for alternative means to benefit learners by having an influence on local school programmes.

We aim to illustrate the possibilities of mechanisms to enable "effective community participation in conversations about redress and education reform" (Vally, 2020, p.1), in order to develop programmes that might make a difference to learners' progress. The research we draw from was conducted among schools catering for learners of lower socio-economic status, and where LSEN are included in the mainstream but without adequate measures in place to assist educators. We provide evidence of collaborative information gathering and the development of responsive programmes, working with adults in the system, to better support learners in two relatively neglected areas of the schooling system, Early Childhood Development (ECD), and career education in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase.

As a theoretical basis for this article, we refer to the bioecological systems theory proposed by Uri Bronfenbrenner. In the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner began challenging the approaches of developmental psychology of the time. In the initial phase of his writings, he was very critical of the predominance of experimental, laboratory-based research, which he described as "the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time" (1979, p. 19). He noted that such research focused on one setting, involving only one or two persons (and seldom with the people with whom the children were familiar or with whom they interacted regularly). In contrast, he proposed that research should be set in environments that were as naturalistic as possible because the contexts of children were at least as influential on their behaviour and well-being as any intra-individual factors. He wrote that the challenge for researchers was to examine "multi-person systems of interaction not limited to a single setting" (1977, p. 514). He used ecology as an analogy to emphasise the two-way interactions between individuals and the settings of their activities and created a heuristic in which different levels of ecological systems are viewed as nested within one another, beginning with the micro-system at the centre and moving outwards to the macro-system as the outer level. However, one of the concerns of systemic theorists relates to the levels of bi-directionality between elements and levels of systems. For example, in relation to oppressive systems, Smail's (2008) model illustrates the impress of power from macro- to micro-systemic levels. This led to greater focus on the influence of contextual factors, including the relationships between the different systemic layers and the impacts of top-down governance, on, for example, officials and educators in South Africa (Smit et al., 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's theory developed over time from a focus on the interactive multi-level systems that influence human activities, through an emphasis on the impacts of systems on

individuals in their development, to the proximal processes at the heart of his bioecological systems theory (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). In this third phase of theory development, he focused on the relationships between learners and influential others in different settings, the personal characteristics of each, as well as factors related to the historical time in which people live; all of these were termed "proximal processes." Specifically, his theoretical ideas were expanded to incorporate ''the forces . . . that may already be operating today to influence what human beings may became tomorrow'' (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 117), rather than being overly concerned with the past. Bronfenbrenner's ideas about systems were further expanded by Neal and Neal (2013), who proposed that we should view "ecological systems as an overlapping arrangement of structures, each directly or indirectly connected to the others by the direct and indirect social interactions of their participants" (p. 722). This suggestion might thus enable more flexible arrangements of elements of the systems as described in the first research study below.

In this article, we outline studies during which we worked collaboratively alongside educators, parents, and district officials to provide greater support to adults who may have felt disempowered within the system. The first study highlights the challenges in the system for LSEN from the perspectives of different stakeholders. We consider the possibilities for changes in practice and illustrate these in a complex bioecological networked diagram.

Complexities of bioecological systems from many different perspectives

Embedded in South Africa's humanitarian discourse, inclusive education (IE) followed global trends of inclusion of all people into wider society without discrimination (Smit et al., 2020). IE in mainstream schools should, according to the Salamanca statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994), provide equal quality education, enabling LSEN to reach their full potential as their basic human right. For example, this has been part of policy in England for over two decades, and since 2014 a holistic approach to LSEN has been mandated there, with a biopsychosocial, and multidimensional approach to learners' needs (Castro & Palikara, 2016), combining educational, health, and social care interventions. However, subsequent implementation of the policy has been variable because of complexities in delivery at a local level and funding limitations (Taberner, 2023).

IE started in South Africa with the implementation of the inclusive policy, described in the Education White Paper in 2001 (Department of Education, 2001). Since then, there have been several curriculum adaptations but for a long time no adapted curriculum was available for learners with barriers in mainstream schools (Mayaba, 2008), and this led to educators struggling to meet their needs. In addition, insufficient support from district levels as well as inadequate school governance and poor teaching, especially in rural areas, were identified as challenges (Smit et al., 2020). In response to these identified problems, the Department of Education (DoE) introduced the Policy of Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (Department of Education, 2014), to assist teachers to identify learning barriers in the

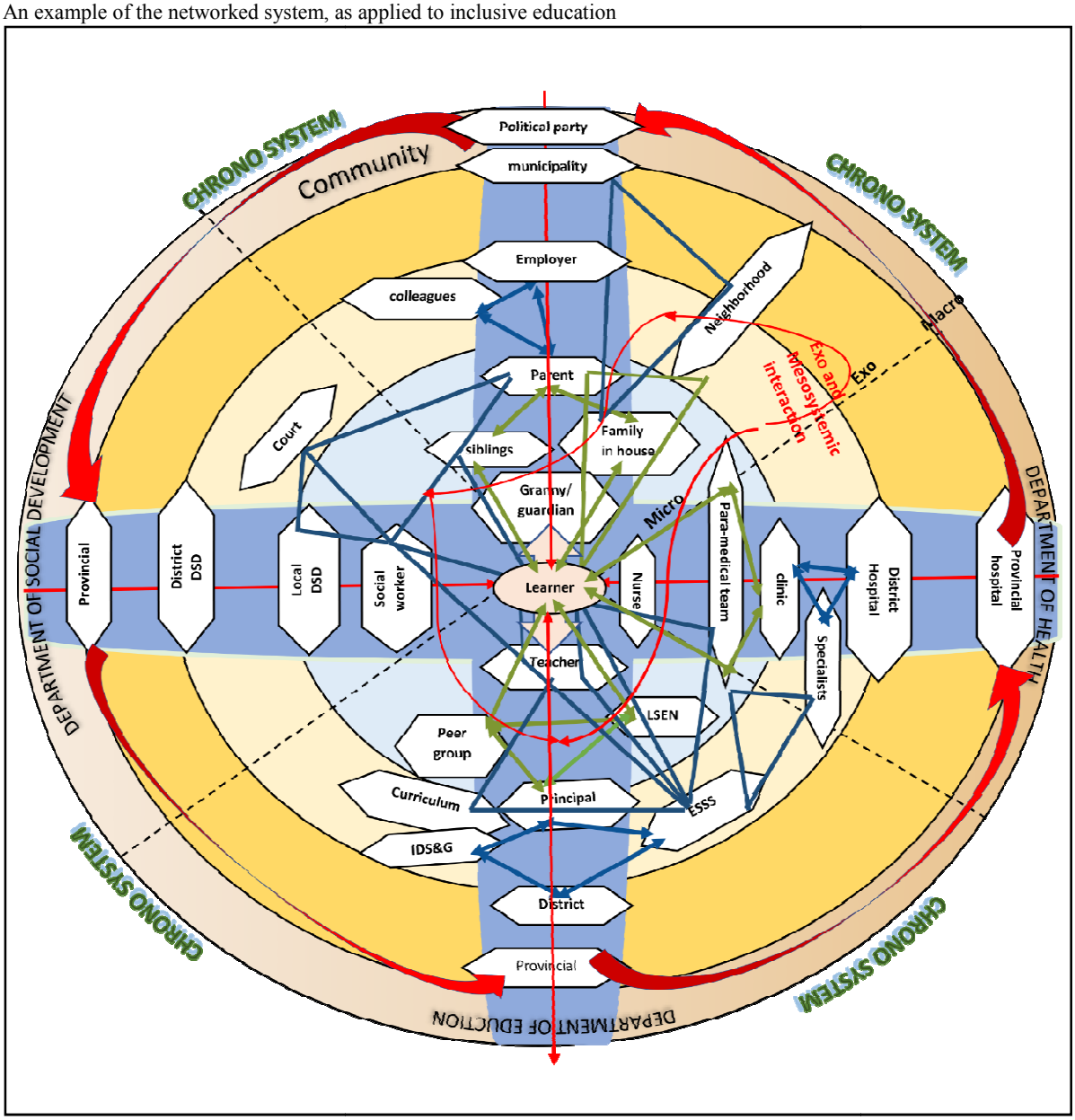
hope of providing a way of offering better support to these learners through the inclusive system.

In gathering the views of educators, district officials, and parents in three diverse mainstream Eastern Cape rural schools, a study by van Vuuren (2022) probed the impact and effects of the inclusive system on the development and social wellbeing of LSEN in grade one. This multi-level systemic study explored the opinions of educators and other stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of the IE system in supporting LSEN, in the best interests of these learners in grade one. This research study was conducted in three diverse mainstream Eastern Cape rural schools and probed perceptions of the impact of the inclusive system on LSEN's development and social wellbeing, the perceived effects and benefits of the current system, and how the education model contributes towards human rights objectives and constitutional imperatives. In the study, we acknowledged the theories and policies of the current inclusive system in relation to promoting inclusion, but this was not being realised successfully in rural areas in South Africa. Overall, the implementation of the policies did not appear to serve the individual educational needs of LSEN given the numerous systemic constraints and contextual barriers identified by participants such as a lack of human and other resources, ineffective Allied Health support services, and insufficient training of educators, together with unhelpful curricular so-called pacesetters that expect rapid progress and are not suitable for rural contexts. These issues led to feelings of inadequacy and very high stress levels in educators who experience a lack of agency in being able to influence the situation.

The findings of van Vuuren (2022) further highlighted the need for better communication and collaboration between and among education and other departments involved in assisting LSEN. Learner development takes place in a community and learners' educational wellbeing cannot be separated from their physical and social wellbeing. As the study unfolded, it became clear that the IE system goes beyond education and cannot be successful without the wider network of support from the broader community, health services, and social care framework. Better interconnections between all government departments at local and provincial levels are thus recommended. These recommendations progress from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic model and support the proposed networked system of Neal and Neal (2013). Van Vuuren (2022) thus theorized a broader multi-level networked system, with greater interactions between different elements, to better support children with barriers to learning.

A networked approach viewed top-down (i.e., from macro- to micro-levels) as well as bottom-up (i.e., from micro- to macro-levels), seeks to provide a balance between theory and practice by reconstructing systems of power and promoting the provision of better communication between and among stakeholders. These could be important considerations since several studies have highlighted the gaps between theory and practice (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht & van Deventer, 2013; Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018).

Figure 1
An example of the networked system, as applied to inclusive education



The networked example in Figure 1 shows the complexity of the inclusive system as constructed from the details provided by informants in van Vuuren's (2022) research study. It illustrates influential sub-systems in the three governmental departments of Health, Education, and Social Development (shown in quarters, clockwise from the right). In addition, the roles of important organisations or people in the community are represented in the top quarter.

A networked approach could enable a better understanding of the specific needs of a learner where the listed departments work together with people in interdisciplinary teams as part of their communities, thus contributing to the wellbeing and healthy development of children in schools. Ideally, the networked system works simultaneously from top-down (i.e., outer levels inwards) and bottom-up (i.e., inner circle outwards) approaches, with all sectors interlinking with each other.

From a top-down perspective

The central blue cross with red arrows between the outer and inner circles indicates the influence of all departments pertaining to children, from national governmental (macro) to local (micro) levels. In the blue cross areas, the elements that are identified show the interlinking of communication between levels, as, for example, in the case of the Department of Education, among provincial, district, and school principal offices. The fine red lines from top-down go through many levels and often appear not to be reaching the learners in terms of implementation of policies. Then, the wider red arrows indicate the macro-level links between the three departmental systems and the community. These are subject to the influence of the chronosystem and delays in high-level collaboration between them will filter into to the networked system, leading to delays in assisting learners. They show the potential networked interactions through all the departments on macro- and exo-levels that play a role in the child's development.

The processes described above proceed downwards and demonstrate the complexity of the many interrelated systems that influence each other but also lead to hiatuses. These also interact in the exo-system and the structural boundaries of each system, as indicated by the black dotted lines, become systemic barriers playing a role in disrupting services for LSEN (as also evidenced in Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

From a bottom-up perspective

The green lines indicate links between microsystems that have a direct influence on the child's daily life. As part of the education microsystem, the learner is part of the LSEN group interacting with peers and educators. The principal might also be part of this microsystem, for example when the learner is sent to the office. The learner with a barrier might also be part of a microsystem interacting with the nurse and assistive therapies team in the Department of Health system. The learner placed in foster care interacts with the social worker and a guardian, who interact as part of the Department of Social Development system. These examples are community interactions along with the guardian, parent, siblings, and extended family in the home. In the rural study by van Vuuren (2022), the situation was often even more complex because of absent parents working away from home (for financial reasons), visiting only over weekends or less frequently. They thus become part of an extended microsystem that influences the child directly or indirectly. The blue lines found further out form parts of other more distal systems linking meso- or exo-levels. These interactions between and among the participants in different settings might have a direct or indirect influence on the learner in a nested model.

The above explanation highlights the complex network of microsystems that also link to the meso- and exo-systems of the community as well as the Education, Social Development, Health, and Justice departments. This points to the importance of good collaboration between these departments if they are to serve the best interests of LSEN, and that key workers could facilitate such links to promote service delivery. There might also be other elements that are

part of a networked system, but that did not emerge through the interviews and data collection in the van Vuuren study (2022).

The networked system diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the complexities, and in particular all the different aspects where failure might lead to policies not realising benefits for LSEN. It also draws attention to the probabilities of gaps in an inclusive system if it is not managed properly. Resourcing challenges, inadequate support, and disruptions to interactions between levels and across boundaries, as indicated in this networked system, are the realities of people's experience in their contexts. In summary, the study found that while national policies promote inclusion, this has not been successfully implemented because of the many systemic and structural constraints. This study thus highlighted the need for a multi-level networked system, with greater interactions between elements, to better support LSEN.

Other studies have also reported similar findings (e.g., Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Nel, et al., 2016; Smit et al., 2020). Nel et al. (2016) noted that the success of inclusive education depends on collaborations between systemic levels, such as between exo-, and meso-systems: for example, should there be limited communication and support from district offices, service delivery in schools will be disrupted. Smit et al. (2020, p. 15) reinforced this point, opining that because of "the lack of accountability and optimal interaction" between educational sub-systems, these in turn impact on the micro-systems of learners in classrooms, family, peers, and neighbourhood, and the roles, relationships, and activities in and between those settings (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Additional pressures on support systems for learners derive from difficult family circumstances, poverty, and unemployment (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018). Smit et al. (2020) focused on the need to better equip educators with expertise in dealing with LSEN, encouraging them to take more responsibility as well as noting the "unavailability of resources and sustenance of infrastructure" that requires school leadership (i.e., head teachers and the governing bodies) to campaign more vigorously for better support from district and provincial levels.

Considering the suggestions by van Vuuren (2022) for better collaborative working between people in the systems as a starting point for interventions, the following two case studies, conducted in the same district of the Eastern Cape, explored the possibilities of intervening from a bottom-up perspective. The decision to work at micro- and meso-levels was prompted by our positions in the system (at local levels), since we did not have influence at exo- and macro-levels. We hope that reporting on the relative success of these two studies might lead to replications and the implementation of these ideas in more settings. While the first case study focused on partnership-building with parents in an ECD centre, in order to promote communication with education providers, the other targeted the FET phase (specifically grades 10 and 11) and illustrates a collaboration with educators in the development of a co-constructed approach to career education in Life Orientation.

Methodology

The studies described in this article were all grounded in a constructivist paradigm, emphasising the collaborative nature of research between the researcher and the participants, between the participants themselves, and the interactions of culture and society (Vygotsky, 1986). In this approach, the active role of the participants in the creation of shared meanings, building knowledge, and understanding is key. Bruner (1966, p. 72) stated that "Knowing is a process not a product", thus emphasising the co-construction of knowledge; the prior knowledge of participants influences their understandings of new knowledge (Hoover, 1996) and helps them apply that knowledge. Given the embedding of knowledge in social contexts and experience-based knowledge construction, we chose interventionist approaches to research. Thus, participants were co-creators in conceptualising and solving problems in practice together. Cobb (1998) asserted that people's capabilities to construct knowledge leads to the restructuring of thought and changes in perspective through creating and controlling material, thus increasing motivation.

In the examples that follow, it can be seen that we worked collaboratively alongside their partners (parents and educators respectively), to explore possibilities for changes in practice. Each of the case studies below (Human, 2023; Maritz, 2022) was granted ethical approval through the relevant university committees and the researchers conducted their work as the basis of their PhD studies. After initial participant recruitment through non-probability sampling, first interviews were held with participants.

In both case studies, a broader group of potential participants was briefed with both written and verbal information about the interventionist participatory research (through information meetings). Volunteers then agreed to participate (eight parents for case study 1 and nine educators initially in case study 2), and individual interviews were conducted with each, collecting background information and informing the planning of group meetings. After the information from these interviews were synthesised and summarised through thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), action research methods were used to arrange and conduct groups.

Action research was well suited to enable the evolving of the projects because of its collaborative nature and the ways in which the methods engaged participants in sharing their knowledge and developing the respective programmes. Action research has the capacity to enlighten people about the "relationship between circumstance, action, and the consequence of their own situation" and can have the effects of "emancipating themselves from the institutional and personal constraints which limit their power to live their own legitimate . . . values" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 23). Details of the resulting programmes that developed iteratively are provided in the findings below.

The recordings of each group meeting were interrogated through the SoaP (Summary on a Page) method (Akhurst & Lawson, 2013). The SoaP method is a means of summarising the unfolding process of action research through detailing the steps taken and points considered in each of the Plan – Act – Observe – Reflect cycles (Akhurst, 2022) that were used to

structure each group meeting. The SoaPs became the means of collecting and analysing the data as the processes evolved, leading to facilitators modifying their interventions and evaluating the work. We summarise the findings of the evolving processes below.

Case study descriptions and findings

1. An educational partnership between parents and education providers in a multilingual ECD setting

Educational partnerships between parents and teachers have the potential to facilitate improved relationships and ultimately improve the child's functioning (Janssen-Vos & Weijers, 2012). Given Maritz's (2022) preference for a strengths and relational approach rather than a deficit, top-down parenting programme method where parents are told how to parent, a partnership-building approach was adopted. Intergenerational poverty and low literacy levels in the Eastern Cape (see Howie et al., 2017) further prompted an educational partnership approach to shift power differentials between parents and practitioners.

This study took place at a well-resourced multilingual (isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English) pre-school that accommodated 28 pre-schoolers. The pre-school was an on-site project of a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and employed two practitioners, one of the amaXhosa group and the other Afrikaans, while both conversed additionally in English. This NGO formed a partnership with *De Activiteit*, in the Netherlands, that was involved in an extensive research project *Thuis in School,* across seven years in various primary schools. They used an educational partnership approach with parents and children from refugee circumstances who were thus exposed to a minimum of two languages. Subsequently, a manual was developed to support the goals of *Working together on Educational Partnership* (Iliás et al., 2019). This manual's guidelines were then adapted to a South African context.

The research team included the researcher who has a social work background, one practitioner (the ECD Co-ordinator), and a translator who was a Psychology Masters student. An introduction session was held to explain the research project to all parent and practitioner participants to allow them to make an informed decision about participation. Eight parents and one practitioner signed up to participate. To move away from top-down terminology, we called our gatherings *iStoep* Talk sessions. We wanted to create an informal atmosphere, sitting on the stoep (or verandah) having conversations while learning from each other, with the focus on the development of the child. The intervention consisted of six *iStoep* workshop sessions using action research reflective cycles to guide the process of making changes and improvements before the next session (see Mc Niff, 2002). A mix of different facilitation tools was used during the facilitated sessions, such as photographs, drawings, a variety of handouts, and short video clips.

Since a literature review flagged the issue of power, which is often identified as a barrier to successful implementation of these partnerships (Philpott & Muthukrishna, 2019), this was addressed at the first session. We explained that all participants were together in this

partnership for the benefit of the child's development and sharing stories from home was as important as sharing stories from the classroom.

During the implementation phase, we held planning sessions to decide jointly on the format of the next topic and which facilitation tools would be best suited to it. Each *iStoep* session lasted approximately two hours and the following morning the research team reflected on what had worked well, what did not work, and what changes would be made for the next session. Six sessions were held with two weeks between each. Practitioners were asked to make video clips of children taking part in relevant activities (for those whose parents had completed consent forms). These would be played at the beginning of the next session before starting the new topic. Parents were also encouraged to either take short video clips, or to give verbal feedback about any activities they had completed at home, or to share drawings (all voluntarily). The first topic was selected by the practitioners, while the parents identified further topics of interest during the first session, together with ground rules that were mutually agreed upon for future *iStoep* sessions.

A summative evaluation was conducted through discussion at the end of the six sessions. Initially, the plan was to run another six *iStoep* sessions with a new set of parents in 2020. With that not being possible because of COVID-19, telephonic follow-up interviews were conducted with parents eight months after the programme. The most meaningful topics identified by the parents were: listening to my child as important, and not always shouting at them; practical ways of how to play with my child; learning can take place with recycled goods and not only shop-bought toys; realising the value of the relationship between the parent, school & child; understanding and implementing a reward chart as a bedtime routine; and the debate about real or fake toys. For example, they discussed the use of a hammer by a 5-year-old, balancing not being overprotective with being responsible. One parent mentioned that she "loved being accommodated as the only isiXhosa-speaking parent." While she had not progressed at school, having her own personal translator made her feel special and allowed her to feel comfortable when voicing her opinion. Changes in home-based practices or behaviour included not to "follow the steps of their past", for example, seeing their kitchens as potential learning and co-operative spaces, rather than excluding children from them.

The most valuable aspect of the *iStoep* sessions as reported eight months later were: communication with school and regular "check-ins" were effected, especially since their child had now started primary school; bedtime routines and the importance of sufficient sleep for young children were noted; the influence of parent's negative behaviour on children was observed; and *iStoep* resources enabled engagement with learning activities at home.

The findings also illustrated ways that educational partnerships can influence practice and policy to improve home and school environments. Regarding limitations, this was a modest research project with one group of participants in a well-resourced ECD site in comparison with many other ECD centres in disadvantaged areas that are often conceived of as mainly being for child-care and that are run for financial reasons.

Recommendations include some form of training for practitioners on how to engage with and include parents, especially when working with diverse and marginalised communities. Furthermore, there is the need to offer a longer programme of relevant topics, as identified by practitioners and parents of children who attend under-resourced ECD pre-schools. This could allow for comparisons to take place. The programme has great potential from a social justice perspective to bridge the gaps that exist between home and school, valuing the knowledges of children and parents, their "lived experience . . . [along with] the prominence of relationships and shared meaningful experiences" (Bloch, 2006, p. 12). When teachers, parents, children, and community partners work together in the meso-system, the learning opportunities of learners are improved (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Interconnections and networking opportunities are therefore strengthened within these micro- and meso-systems. A manual outlining the approach and activities was developed and is available for further piloting in other contexts.

2. A focus on career education in Life Orientation, in collaboration with educators

Located at the other end of schooling, this case study is of a career education programme developed in collaboration with educators from under-resourced schools with learners who have been socio-economically disadvantaged. Career development theory and assessments have often been applied unscientifically to disadvantaged groups in South Africa, with little consideration of the diverse and challenging contexts of most of the learners. The application of Western assessment constructs is not suited to most learners' career needs (Jansen van Vuuren et al., 2022) because these do not factor in the resource-constrained situations in which they live. Furthermore, the associated costs of available materials often make tools financially inaccessible to most learners in less well-resourced public schools.

Career development researchers recognise that career trajectories are inextricably influenced by the living environment of learners (Maree et al., 2006). In response, there has been a shift towards contextualised approaches. Postmodern career development theories and models recognise that career counselling and development should focus on supporting individuals in constructing their careers from their own experiences within their living environments, particularly for learners from marginalised communities (Maree, 2017). Contextual factors in their homes or communities thus facilitate or constrain their career progress.

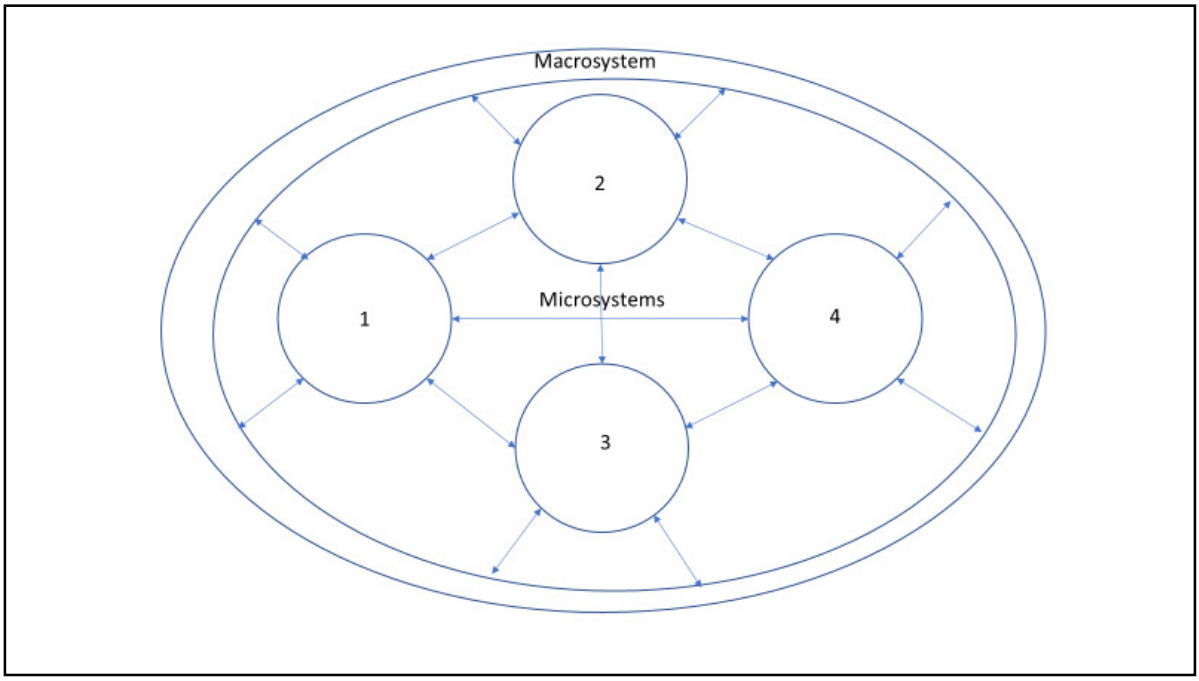
The study by Human (2023), was conducted in nine disadvantaged public schools in Gqeberha, in the Eastern Cape. It explored FET phase Life Orientation (LO) educators' perspectives regarding the relevance of the LO curriculum to learners in marginalised public schools. Such learners access career guidance and support predominantly through school LO lessons, under the sub-theme of career and career choices. The study uncovered limitations in the teaching of the LO curriculum in these marginalised schools. These included inadequate educator training in career ideas, the lack of or limited resources such as assistive technological devices to explore careers, insufficient quality time for career exploration, and limited or outdated career-related textbooks. Educators explained that the one-size-fits-all LO

curriculum does not consider the needs of learners in their schools, and refers to tasks and activities that learners, because of socio-economic factors, are often unable to complete. These findings emphasised that schools in marginalised communities should consider the context and real-life experiences of learners in the career-related teaching materials.

Previous South African research using the Developmental-Contextual Framework (DCF) (Vondracek et al., 1986) with marginalised communities (e.g., Phala, 2019; Roberson, 2018; Spencer, 1999; Stead, 1996), revealed the influence of a great number of contextual factors in communities on the career decision-making of learners or students. The research found the DCF to be an intelligible and cost-effective tool (Phala, 2019), and thus a valuable career exploration resource for use in marginalised communities.

This study thus used the Vondracek et al., (1986) DCF for the intervention design, based upon ecological systems ideas (as first described by Bronfenbrenner in 1979). As shown in Figure 2 below, the DCF is comprised of four microsystems and eight macrosystemic elements. Bi-directional arrows link the microsystems to the macrosystem, indicating "the relation between the individual attribute(s) and the contextual feature(s)" (Vondracek et al., 1986: p. 80).

Figure 2
Outline of the Vondracek et al. (1986) model



1. Family of origin
2. Child extra-familial network
3. Adult extra-familial network
4. Family of procreation

The outer circle of the framework lists eight macrosystemic elements that are more distant social and environmental contexts that impact on individuals' career development (Phala, 2019). These are social and economic policy, technological advances, job opportunities, the organisational or institutional context, environmental conditions, labour laws, sociocultural

contexts, and economic conditions. The four microsystems identified in the inner circle indicate the contexts in which the individual is involved and represent the environments that directly influence their behaviour and development (Vondracek et al., 1986). These are the family of origin, the child's extra-familial network (including peers, school, and part-time work), the adult extra-familial network (including work and other relationships), and the adult family of procreation (placing additional demands or stress on work-related decisions).

As an attempt to address the career resources gap in structurally marginalised and under-resourced public schools, we trialled the Vondracek et al. (1986) DCF model as the basis of creating relevant career development activities with LO educators, to develop and explore a contextualised, relevant, and low-cost career education programme. Exploration of the DCF with the LO participants through action research over a series of focus group sessions resulted in the co-construction of a career education programme, with activities and guidelines to ensure that the context of communities is embedded into the career lessons.

LO educators may be major influencers on the career choice and goals of learners. In under-resourced schools these educators are often the only career resource that learners can access and from whom they can draw. The study confirmed that LO educators are critical resources so it is essential that LO educators are adequately trained and provided with the relevant skills, career knowledge, and career resources to provide quality career education and support to learners in disadvantaged public schools. The study further revealed that career education programmes that speak to the needs of the learners, such as the one that resulted from the focus group sessions in the study, have the potential to address the career development needs of learners from marginalised public schools.

Training on how to work with and to draw developmental-contextual factors into the existing LO curriculum is essential if we are to make the learning content more relevant and related to the world of the learners, possibly enabling educators to better reach learners. Learners' life experiences should resonate with learning content presented to them. The study thus proposes the consideration of the embeddedness of individuals within their contexts and that the impact of these different contextual factors on career exploration and career decision-making should be central to career education, particularly with learners from resource-limited environments. Such approaches may add prestige to LO as a subject and underscore its value to both educators and learners. The study also developed a manual to encourage wider replication and trialling of the activities.

Discussion

Based on a bioecological analysis of challenges in schools as they strive to implement inclusive policies, the work of van Vuuren (2022) highlighted the need for enhanced interconnections between elements of the educational, health, and social care systems and for more holistic approaches to meet learners' needs. Given the complexities of improving systemic interactions at macro- and exo-systemic levels (Smit et al., 2020), we acknowledge that it is difficult for individual practitioners to make an impact more broadly, and this may lead to feelings of helplessness and passivity. However, in response to identified difficulties

at ECD and FET levels, we were encouraged to trial interventions during which adults would work together in local contexts to strive for change. We have described two case studies that provide modest examples of interventions by practitioners, focused upon linking meso-systemic elements together through building educational partnerships (the first between parents and ECD practitioners, the second with educators from different schools). While these studies reached a limited number of participants, thus restricting their potential impact and effects, if similar interventions were rolled out more widely, or scaled up, it is possible that similar effects would be found. As an outcome of both case studies, manuals of the programmes have been produced to facilitate replication in other contexts.

The case study by Maritz (2022) demonstrated the value of working in partnership with parents at ECD level. Since the ECD sector has become integrated into the Department of Education in the past year (having previously been the responsibility of the Department of Social Development), working more actively on expanding similar partnership work could have many benefits. For example, should such partnerships build parents' confidence to engage more actively with educators (as was evident amongst some participants' reports), this could enable them to motivate more actively for support for their children should they have special needs. Van Vuuren's (2022) work identified the difficulties of encouraging parental involvement at grade one level so more widespread prior partnership work with parents could lead to better support for learners at an earlier stage. Educators could also encourage parents to seek assistance actively from other relevant state systems if needed, like, for example the clinics run by the Department of Health.

The second case study explored the work of Human (2023), an educational psychologist employed in a district office, with educators from a number of different schools. The project sought to co-construct a more suitable programme of career-related activities for grades 10 to 12 learners in disadvantaged areas, because the suggested curricular LO activities did not link clearly with the learners' contexts. Through collaborating, the educators and researcher drew from their combined knowledge of local contexts and circumstances. They designed a programme that engaged learners in group activities more relevant to their life experiences and that could be replicated in similar resource-constrained settings at minimal cost.This work could be scaled up through an existing national network to explore the evidence for effective career-related work and could thus be influential more broadly at systemic levels.

Both case studies evidence the value of bottom-up working, drawing together ideas developed in Western contexts but interrogating and re-purposing these in conjunction with local knowledge systems and settings. This then enables the work to counter the "reproduction of epistemic colonisation" (Seehawer et al., 2021, p. 519). Both cases also illustrate inclusive and relational features coherent with the African-centred approaches advocated for by Ratele (2017). The collaborations enabled practitioners to counter their seeming powerlessness in the system and this led to enhanced agency. Furthermore, partnership work was facilitated by using the first language of all, thus illustrating the potential for educational transformation being grounded in local contexts and epistemologies (Seehawer et al., 2021).

There is also resonance between the findings of the case studies reported in this paper and the three benefits listed by Ebersöhn (2017). Also drawing on participatory case study data from three Southern African studies of educational interventions oriented towards well-being, they conclude that outcomes include

> mobilising connectedness (school-communities where individuals do not feel isolated); developing self-esteem (. . . where students, teachers and parents are not ashamed of who they are); and investing in happy early childhood (. . . build[ing] initial trust . . . rather than fear and distrust). (p. 8)

We believe that our case studies also evidence these aspects. Ebersöhn (2017), too, emphasised the use of different perspectives that build on connectedness and self-confidence in engaging in multi-sectoral responses.

Conclusion

Considering the complexities of interconnections explored by van Vuuren (2022), it would be easy to feel disempowered in the face of the extensive needs for educational transformation in South Africa. However, our paper responds to the SAERA 2023 conference theme: *Education(al) Foundations, Education(al) Futures.* In this article, we have provided evidence of working towards improved futures, working with adults at both ECD and FET levels to meet learners' needs through using collaborative information gathering and developing responsive programmes to prompt systemic changes in a resource-challenged district of the Eastern Cape. Given the difficulties faced by individual practitioners at systemic levels, we have shown the benefits of the interactive work of parents with educators, or among educators from different schools, to better support learners in two somewhat neglected areas of the curriculum that both have impacts on the future of learners. Resultant themes show that partnership working builds on people's combined knowledge of local circumstances, and that bottom-up collaboration can lead to positive programme development.

These are examples of finding ways of being open to opportunities to work differently in the systems, not allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by the needs and difficulties we encounter. Seehawer et al. (2021) noted that educational practitioners may feel that they do not have the power to influence change higher up in the system. However, they emphasised that change can be enacted by starting small, noting that "(b)ottom-up decolonisation emphasises the agency of individuals and groups such as teachers, communities, parents, learners, elders, traditional healers, teacher educators and academics" (p. 526). Such seemingly small initiatives could accumulate and lead to greater changes and transformation in educational outcomes for the learners of the future.

From these studies, we recommend that practitioners strive to bring together groups, if possible across roles or settings, to further trial one or other of the programmes developed by Maritz (2022) and Human (2023). Furthermore, practitioners need to strive to disseminate information about the programmes to district level officials in order to prompt better exo-level support for meso-level interactions. Involvement in collaboratively developing these

programmes enabled us to move to more hopeful positions regarding possibilities for educational transformation, and we thus recommend that discouraged practitioners strive to become involved in similar developments. We all need to improve the functionality and effectiveness of support systems for educators and officials (see Smit et al., 2020) for the benefit of learners in their micro-systems, and we recommend similar engagements to enable such effects.

Harrison (2020, p. 123) noted that "if we listen carefully, we will discern . . . millions of voices asking to be heard, looking for opportunity, seeking to be part of our common future." They then went on to say that we need to find ways to channel the discontented voices that we hear "into a more inclusive and innovative society. The problems may loom large, but they can be overcome . . . And at its most radical, a caring and creative spirit is all that is required to harness the thunder." We hope that we have illustrated this spirit in our examples and encourage others to find ways of working with other adults in our educational system for the benefit of all learners.

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