


Creating indoor learning areas to implement the Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum

**Author:**Zanele Zama¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Education,
Faculty of Early Childhood
Education, University of
KwaZulu-Natal, Durban,
South Africa

Corresponding author:

Zanele Zama,
zamaz@ukzn.ac.za

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Background: A safe and inclusive indoor learning environment reflects different ways of knowing, actuality and thinking. In the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) context, indoor learning areas influence the exploration of teaching and learning activities.

Aim: This article explored rural ECCE teachers' experiences of creating indoor learning areas as required by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for children from birth to 4 years.

Setting: Six purposively selected teachers from the three rural ECCE centres in KwaZulu-Natal province that transitioned to using the NCF participated in the study.

Methods: A qualitative case study located within the interpretive paradigm was employed. Data that were inductively analysed were collected through semi-structured interviews with two teachers in each of the three centres. Transformative learning theory underpinned the study.

Results: The study found that six teachers who desired to learn from each other engaged in a collaborative learning venture within their centres and complied with the NCF to create indoor learning areas in the interest of young children.

Conclusion: The study argues that teachers shifted their insights from the challenges to achieving the objectives of the NCF. Thus, it questioned the assumption that rural teachers lack the knowledge to design learning areas.

Contribution: Rural ECCE teachers are committed to learning for the development of young children.

Keywords: indoor learning areas; transformative learning; teachers; rural; Early Childhood Care and Education centres.

Introduction

Indoor learning areas are spaces inside a building or a room that facilitate various learning experiences for young children (Meier & Marais 2018). Within Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres, indoor learning areas cater to young children's developmental needs in achieving the curriculum's objectives (Chepkonga 2017). In the South African ECCE context, indoor learning areas are essential for supporting hands-on learning and exploring teaching and learning activities aligned with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for children from birth to 4 years (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2015).

Emphasising socially and culturally sensitive learning environments as fundamental values is crucial to facilitating learning that benefits all young children. The NCF guides the comprehensive development of young children, recognising the significance of care and the provision of quality basic education as a national priority (Campbell-Barr & Bogatic 2017).

The NCF recognises teachers and all adults working with young children as active participants and knowledgeable individuals capable of sharing their expertise to enhance their practices (Rudolph 2017). Teachers are key contributors to fostering early learning and cultivating a supportive learning environment (Karlidag 2021). The emphasis is placed on collective competencies and teamwork to accomplish the curriculum objectives.

Nonetheless, literature often portrays rural ECCE teachers as lacking the capacity to create suitable learning spaces for the holistic development of young children (Kirsten 2017; Matjokana 2021). In line with this perspective, Labuschagne (2015) highlights that children in rural centres frequently find themselves in classrooms that lack stimulation for their social, physical, cognitive and emotional growth because of their teachers' insufficient understanding of effective planning.

However, teachers' efforts and positive approach to collaborative learning in achieving the curriculum's goals are frequently overlooked (Steyn 2017).

In exploring six rural ECCE teachers' experiences in creating indoor learning areas as the implementation of the NCF, this article sought to contribute to literature and research development within the ECCE sector. The research study examined the strengths and challenges of rural teachers during the implementation process, aiming to present a more comprehensive perspective on the experiences of ECCE educators in rural areas.

The National Curriculum Framework

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO International Bureau of Education 2017), the term 'framework' suggests flexibility. Therefore, the NCF was presented as a flexible guiding policy for teachers and adults working with children from birth to 4 years to explicitly create equal opportunities for quality learning (Murris 2019). The NCF recognises the importance of local context in early learning for teachers to create a curriculum that suits the needs of children. Therefore, the ECCE sector differs from formal schools where teachers are restricted by the policies on what and how to teach (Maharajh, Nkosi & Mkhize 2016). The NCF depicts the values of the South African Constitution to promote the achievement of equality and to protect disadvantaged people from any kind of discrimination. It promotes the holistic development of all young children.

Instead of subjects, the NCF includes six Early Learning Development Areas (ELDAs). The ELDAs are: (1) well-being, (2) identity and belonging, (3) communication, (4) creativity, (5) exploring mathematics and (6) knowledge and understanding of the world. The developmental guidelines for different categories of child development are included in the NCF while teaching and learning activities are intertwined in each ELDA to support care and education and combat inequalities that affect children's development (Murris 2019). Therefore, the NCF accentuates the creation of learning areas for children to discover and explore those activities.

The first ELDA, *well-being*, highlights the importance of health and safety and provides opportunities for physical, social, cognitive and psychological connections to all educational experiences (DBE 2015). Emphasis is placed on safe teaching and play resources, which are substantial in the other five ELDAs. Therefore, well-being is integrated in all other areas (Ebrahim & Irvine 2012). The subsequent ELDA, *identity and belonging*, is linked to life skills activities learned through social interactions. Thus, young children learn to make decisions individually and as part of a group, indoors and outdoors. The ELDA *communication* was designed to aid young children in developing language skills through conversations with peers and teachers, singing songs, reciting rhymes and sharing stories at the required level. In *exploring mathematics*, children are introduced to numbers, counting and problem-solving at an appropriate level through playful activities. They are also

introduced to shapes and objects, engaging in classification and sorting, both as individuals and in groups, in an enjoyable and stimulating manner (Kortjass 2019).

Creativity as the ELDA is fostered by developing creative skills, such as dancing, drawing and scribbling, as children engage in imaginative writing. Their gross motor skills are also developed as they move indoors and outdoors. The ELDA *knowledge and understanding* of the world are linked to young children's daily experiences within their families and with various individuals in their homes and surroundings. Practical experiences are provided for young children to explore, investigate and design in their physical environment. The NCF provides this content as examples for teachers to plan activities that cater to the needs of all children in various ECCE contexts.

Early Childhood Care and Education in the South African context

Prior to 1994, the provision of ECCE primarily occurred in privileged communities, with minimal assistance available for those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Mbarathi, Mthembu & Diga 2016). Numerous rural ECCE centres operated without adequate guidance to promote the care and development of young children (Atmore 2013). Consequently, the ECCE sector marginalised children and teachers from rural ECCE centres for an extended period. As a result, most young children could not access well-equipped ECCE centres staffed by qualified teachers. After the first democratic elections in 1994, policies to address the inequalities in different South African education sectors, including the ECCE sector, were emphasised.

In 2015, when the early years of learning were declared a priority, the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECD) was introduced to improve ECCE services (Department of Social Development [DSD] 2015). The NIECD became a better start and provided a promising future for all. However, the policy guidance was more accessible for easy-to-reach communities than in poor and rural areas (Mbarathi et al. 2016). Many children from underprivileged ECCE centres continued to be underprepared for school (Biersteker et al. 2016). Therefore, in 2015, the South African government made further plans to advance the quality of early education (Atmore 2018). The outcomes led to the development and introduction of the South African NCF for providing care and education for children from birth to 4 years as explicated earlier.

To introduce the NCF, the Department of Social Development organised interrelated ECCE centres into geographic clusters for easy communication. Thereafter, the DBE provided workshops introducing the NCF to different ECCE centres, including those in rural settings.

Early Childhood Care and Education in the rural setting

Many South African researchers concur that although the term 'rural' carries various connotations, it remains linked to

underprivileged and relatively underdeveloped contexts (Kirsten 2017). Rural areas denote regions far from cities and face diverse socioeconomic challenges, such as escalating poverty and sluggish economic growth. The impoverished status of rural communities significantly impacted educational experiences. Consequently, numerous ECCE centres in rural communities often demonstrate low care and educational provisions (Ashley-Cooper, Van Niekerk & Atmore 2019). The education of young children in rural ECCE centres was compromised. Labuschagne (2015) asserts that rural ECCE centres mostly experience a scarcity of teaching and learning resources, and the learning spaces are usually not adequately prepared for children to play and learn. Teachers lack planning ideas and professional skills to implement the official curriculum as they are mostly not qualified for teaching (Sun, Rao & Pearson 2015). Therefore, the deprived conditions of rural ECCE centres are very far from ideal for supporting early development (Mwaipopo et al. 2021).

While rural ECCE teachers are often not formally trained (Labuschagne 2015), dedicated educators create learning opportunities to accomplish the curriculum's objectives (Eliason & Jenkin 2008). They engage in collaborative learning to enhance the development of young children (Wells 2014). Qualifications and individual experiences do not always indicate excellence and relevance during the planning process when working collectively (Human Sciences Research Council 2010). They willingly share their expertise and skills to achieve positive outcomes. They even seek community support in the face of challenges (Drake & Reid 2018).

Indoor learning areas in the Early Childhood Care and Education

Indoor learning areas are recognised as the spaces inside the classroom designed to cater to the educational requirements of young children (Labuschagne 2015). They typically encompass areas such as fantasy, cognitive, reading and creative corners where young children can play and learn, depending on the physical space and the availability of play resources. Indoor learning areas facilitate sensory and psychological needs to promote learning. Furthermore, these areas also influence the exploration of teaching and learning activities for emotional, intellectual, social and physical development, which are incidentally achieved through play (Meier & Marais 2018). Young children are encouraged to observe, touch and explore these created areas to support the implementation of the ECCE curriculum for their holistic development.

Play and learning resources outline the activities for young children in each area to meet their developmental needs (Chepkonga 2017). Therefore, resources foster effective learning by reflecting a child's culture and identity (Greenman 2005) while ensuring active participation. Teachers provide picture books and puzzles in the reading area to encourage emergent reading (Cakirer & Garcia 2010). In the construction corner, they organise blocks of various shapes and sizes to enhance creativity as children compare sizes, shapes and colours. They plan fantasy areas to support

imaginative play for children to play and learn in the related context (Meier & Marais 2018).

According to the NCF, prewriting and fine motor skills required for formal schooling are also developed as young children draw, paint and trace objects in different classroom areas. Consequently, indoor learning areas promote physical competencies highlighted in ELDA well-being, while cognitive readiness and social skills are developed in all the ELDAs (DBE 2015). Teachers acknowledge the diverse foundational learning and local resources to facilitate contextualised interventions while young children discover as they experience their surroundings as prescribed in Knowledge and Understanding of the World (Murriss 2019). Usually, teachers collaborate to plan the classroom's physical space, available instructional resources and activities (Ebrahim, Okwany & Barry 2019) to support young children's learning in line with the curriculum requirements.

In the ECCE, quality learning is determined by the conduciveness of the area and the quality of interactions with the available resources. Hence, quality denotes how well young children learn and how much their education construes into developmental gains (Chepkonga 2017). Children are allowed to make choices and decisions under the supervision of a teacher. That assumes a child's vision as an active participant in creating indoor learning areas (DBE 2015; Essa 2014).

The theoretical framework

To explore teachers' experiences in creating indoor learning areas as the implementation of the NCF, Mezirow's transformative learning theory (TLT) framed the study to understand teachers as meaning-making beings capable of becoming critical self-reflective thinkers (Mezirow 1991). Transformative learning theory was initially developed by Mezirow in 1978 to explain the learning experiences of adult women who returned to community college after a long time away from education (Mongiello 2015). Mezirow (2000) considered learning as a voluntary effort for people to solve related problems. Therefore, adult women intentionally collaborated to share their experiences and learn from each other. The new learning process significantly impacted their lives and supported the development of new skills for permanent change.

Although Mezirow initially based his theory on formal learning experiences, he later integrated informal discussions and dialogues as crucial components of transformative learning (Mezirow 2000), establishing its relevance to the study. Mezirow was heavily influenced by critical theorists and, specifically, by Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984), which posits various types of actions and domains of transformative learning (Kitchenham 2008). Habermas (1984) integrated practical learning and social norms into transformative learning. He suggested that adults communicate and collaborate to share their skills in teams to transform (Steyn 2017).

The learning process becomes directed by the willingness of adults to engage in self-teaching in a natural setting (Cranton 2006). Consequently, adults become self-directed learners who recognise challenging situations as key phases for transformative learning. They discovered that stressful situations often trigger transformative learning (Mezirow 2000). Their learning efforts and critical reflections become vital concepts in transformative learning (Mezirow 2000).

Mezirow's TLT is related to the rural ECCE teachers who collaborated and worked together for their learning and the development of young children. They took a collective social decision to transform to the guidance of the NCF that catered to the needs and interests of a child. While rural ECCE teachers were portrayed as lacking the capacity to create suitable learning spaces (Kirsten 2017; Sotuku, Okeke & Mathwasa 2016), they learn from each other to achieve the objectives of the curriculum (Zama & Mashiya 2022).

Research methods and design

This qualitative study adopted an exploratory case study design to explore teachers' experiences in creating indoor learning areas for the development of young children in three rural ECCE centres. Exploratory case studies provided extensive and in-depth descriptions of a phenomenon in its natural setting (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018). This study attempted for self-determination and openness to better understand the participant's point of view (Creswell 2014). It permitted the participants to create meaning and construct reality based on their interaction with the world.

Thirteen ECCE centres formed part of the Umbumbulu cluster that were known to accommodate and support student teachers from the Institution of Higher Learning, where the author worked as an Early Childhood Development (ECD) lecturer. After visiting student teachers for assessment, all the centres were recruited for participation. However, only three centre (see Table 1) were willing to participate in the study and share their practices. All three centres were committed to continuously learning the vision of the NCF. They were purposively sampled and met the inclusion criteria to follow the guidance of NCF when creating indoor learning areas. Two teachers allocated to teaching young children (aged between 3 and 4 years) from each centre agreed to participate. Therefore, six teachers were sampled to participate in the research study.

Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection instrument. Individual face-to-face interviews, which lasted 1 h each, were conducted with all the participants in the afternoon. The participants shared their experiences of creating indoor learning areas. During interviews, the author permitted pauses for thinking and rephrased questions to obtain more detailed data. Because the participants were not confident in using English, they preferred to use both IsiZulu and English when answering the research questions.

The author recorded and transcribed the participants' voices. The recordings and the transcriptions of the interviews enriched the credibility and reliability of the data (Yin 2014). All the responses were transcribed by the author into English.

Data analysis

This study adopted the thematic data analysis approach, which was manually performed (Nieuwenhuis 2016). The data analysis spiral, which follows procedures similar to thematic analysis, was also used (Creswell & Poth 2018). The researcher meticulously engaged with the data and transcribed and read it multiple times to develop initial codes. Codes were then categorised into themes.

The participants were coded as T1-C1, T2-C1, T1-C2, T2-C2, T1-C3 and T2-C3 to ensure anonymity. T1 and T2 stand for teacher 1 and teacher 2, respectively, and C1, C2 and C3 stand for centre 1, centre 2 and centre 3, respectively.

Ethical considerations

To avoid unethical behaviours and inappropriate manipulation of information (Cohen et al. 2018), ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and from the Department of Social Development (Ref. S6/2/1). Before the interviews, the purpose of the research, interviews and ethical considerations were explained. The participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the research study as they wished with no adverse consequences, and they voluntarily signed the consent forms.

Results

The findings from the data collected using semi-structured interviews with the participants responsible for the development of young children are discussed in three themes: the teachers' collaborative learning efforts, conducive learning spaces and challenging conditions in rural ECCE centres.

Theme 1: The teachers' collaborative learning efforts

The study participants embraced change to follow the vision of the NCF when creating indoor learning areas. Data showed that indoor learning areas were created to explore the activities as an opportunity to achieve the objectives of the curriculum. The process became a collaborative effort for the six rural ECCE teachers to learn the NCF together. To explain how they created indoor learning areas, a participant said:

'After the NCF was introduced for the first time to us, we committed to achieving its objectives. Before the planning process, we organised meeting time to read the vision of the NCF together to understand what has to be done. We agreed to meet twice a week to start the planning process. We also wanted to be

TABLE 1: The three centres and the participating teachers.

Centre 1	This was a home structure and each age group had their own separate room. There were 42 children of different ages and 6 teachers. The rooms were very small.
Young children (aged between 3 and 4 years)	Fourteen young children were allocated to the two teachers participating in this study. T1 was 29 years old with 7 years of teaching experience and had obtained ECD Level 4. T2 was 31 years old with 3 years of teaching experience and had obtained ECD Level 4.
Teaching and learning resources	Inadequate teaching and learning resources. This included tables and chairs for children to sit on, a few reading books, charts with pictures, a Lego game with bright and colourful pieces, and a small kitchen utensil in the fantasy area. If need be, teachers make other play resources by themselves.
Centre 2	Funded by the DSD but operating in the community hall partitioned to make separate rooms. There were 31 children and 5 teachers.
Young children (aged between 3 and 4 years)	Thirteen young children were allocated to the two teachers participating in this study. T1 was 24 years old with 2 years of teaching experience and had obtained ECD Level 4. T2 was 27 years old with 3 years of teaching experience and had obtained ECD Level 4.
Teaching and learning resources	There were small tables and chairs for children. Teaching and learning resources such as building blocks in the construction corner and storybooks in the reading corner were also available.
Centre 3	This centre was a proper structure with very small separate rooms. There were 32 children and 8 teachers.
Young children (aged between 3 and 4 years)	Sixteen young children were allocated to two teachers participating in the study. T1 was 32 years old with 8 years of teaching experience and obtained ECD Level 4. T2 was 29 years old with 5 years of teaching experience and obtained ECD Level 4.
Teaching and learning resources	There were small tables and chairs available. Teaching and learning resources were insufficient, but charts, pictures for reading and kitchen utensils were available for children to fantasise.

ECD, Early Childhood Development; DSD, Department of Social Development.

clear about the curriculum content and the activities for the development of all children.’ (T1-C2)

Another participant stated:

‘Only two of the six teachers from our centre attended the NCF training that the DBE conducted. I thought we would get another opportunity, but our principal was unsure if the subject advisors were going to come back for further training in the area. We decided as a staff to start reading the NCF together to plan for teaching. We also wanted to learn from those who attended the NCF training.’ (T1-C1)

Another participant added the following:

‘In our centre, only one teacher attended the NCF training since most of us were busy that day. The training session occurred during a normal weekday while many other teachers were expected to be with children in the centre. After that, we committed to follow the guidelines of the NCF together when planning for teaching.’ (T1-C3)

Data showed that some of the participants were unable to attend NCF training as they were committed in their centres. While they expected further training from the DBE to understand the NCF, they committed to learning from each other to begin the planning process. They organised suitable time to learn the NCF together. Achieving the objectives of the NCF became a norm in all the centres. The participants highlighted what they learned:

‘We started by reading the vision of the NCF and learned that young children have to see, touch, and play with the resources that are safe to learn. After that, we started thinking about teaching and playing resources to use for teaching and learning.’ (T2-C2)

A participant from the same centre, said:

‘The NCF made it clear that social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development are important for young children. As they play in suitable organised areas, they learn. Therefore, before we teach, we are required to learn how children learn. The learning space has to be suitable for learning.’ (T1-C2)

In C2, the participants mentioned that after reading the NCF together, they started realising the importance of safe resources for young children to touch, learn and develop holistically. They also mentioned that they learned to identify suitable teaching and learning activities and the importance of organising suitable areas for young children to explore those activities.

They elucidated on what they learned and said:

‘We identified teaching and learning activities included in the six ELDA’s used as subjects in the NCF. After that, we started thinking about the learning areas for young children to explore those activities.’ (T1-C1)

‘While reading, we noticed that we are not restricted to teaching all the activities included in each ELDA. The activities are provided as the examples since NCF was designed to be flexible. We are free to decide on the activities that are relevant to us and our children.’ (T2-C1)

Data showed that the participants from C1 learned that instead of subjects, teaching and learning activities are identified from the six ELDA’s of the NCF. They also learned to understand the NCF as a flexible curriculum policy and guidance for the development of related activities. However, teaching and learning activities from the six ELDA’s are provided as examples for them to plan their own activities. Another participant from C3 added to what the participants from C1 and C2 learned:

‘After identifying the activities from the ELDA’s, all the teachers who teach similar groups started planning together. As we teach young children, we discuss their activities and the areas where the activities will be explored.’ (T1-C3)

‘We learned that young children play to learn the activities. Therefore, safe play resources are important in all the ECCE centres.’ (T1-C3)

Data showed that teachers teaching the same group of children worked together to discuss teaching and learning activities and started planning. The participants of the study

who were responsible for young children planned together. They considered the importance of safety as young children play to learn and stated in support:

'We started planning indoor learning areas for young children to learn the activities.' (T1-C3, T2-C3)

The data showed that after reading and identifying teaching and learning activities, the participants started planning indoor learning areas for young children to learn, which included the teaching and learning resources that are safe for young children to explore.

Theme 2: Conducive learning spaces

The data showed that it became essential for the participants to plan conducive learning spaces for young children to explore the activities. When planning indoor learning areas, they discuss the activity, identify the area, and consider its values (Meier & Marais 2018) and resources that are conducive to learning. To elaborate on the creation of conducive learning spaces, participants said:

'Although our classrooms are very small, we created a reading, fantasy, construction corner and theme corner. The fantasy corner included small kitchen equipment for children to play and pretend to be adults in the classroom. Children mostly explore activities based on their knowledge and understanding of the world, their identity and belonging, and their well-being in the fantasy area. In the reading corner, we keep the reading books that were donated by a particular Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). In the reading corner, we pretend to read, tell stories, and talk about different things at the level of young children. I also organised the theme to keep all the theme related teaching and learning resources after teaching.' (T1-C3)

'Because we had one Lego game in my classroom, I can mention that we have a construction area, a reading area and a fantasy area. The Lego pieces are incomplete but colourful for young children to spend time with, construct objects, learn colours, and play appropriately. Although there are no books in the reading area, we keep charts with pictures to discuss with children. The space allows for only three areas for my children to play and learn.' (T1-C1)



Note: The picture was taken by a teacher in her centre who supplied the photograph and granted permission to be published.

FIGURE 1: Play resources in a fantasy area.

In support of what T1-C1 said, T2-C1 said:

'In our centre, we learned to make small chairs and other resources for young children to fantasise in the fantasy corner. Reading books are scarce. But, I do have a reading area with very few books to quickly identify a reading corner. My class only has a fantasy area, a construction area and a reading area.' (T2-C1)

Data showed that the participants from C1 and C3 created the fantasy area, reading area, theme area and construction area. While C3 relied on sponsorship, data showed that creative teachers in C1 made their own play resources. The findings relate to Eliason and Jenkin (2008), who stated that passionate teachers create opportunities to achieve the objectives of the curriculum.

Similar to C1 and C3, the participants from C2 shared indoor learning areas that they identified for young children to explore teaching and learning activities to achieve the objectives of the NCF. They shared their distinctive learning experiences and said:

'Although we partitioned the community hall to make classes, we have a reading corner with books for reading, a fantasy corner with related make-believe resources, and a construction corner with some blocks and other related resources. We wanted children to develop communication skills in the reading corner while they play and socialise to learn in the fantasy corner. There is enough space, but our indoor areas are not permanent.' (T1-C2)

Another participant added:

'For the safety of our resources, we pack everything in the store room every Friday.' (T2-C2)

Data showed that the participants organised indoor learning spaces as they understood the activities they wanted young children to explore and related those activities to the ELDAs. As provided briefly in Table 2, data showed indoor learning spaces, the activities and the ELDAs to which the activities link.

Data showed reading, fantasy (see Figure 1) and construction corners as the common conducive learning spaces in all three centres. In C3, the participants also mentioned that they created a themed corner to keep all theme-related resources after teaching. Although such areas were not permanent in C2, children read, play and socialise to learn in different organised areas indoors. While the participants did not mention all the related ELDAs, the activities aligned with the ELDAs. This is because while the reading relates to communication, different stories can relate to all the ELDAs of the NCF. Moreover, the activities are integrated in the ECCE (Ebrahim & Irvine 2012). It was also evident from the data that the participants learned to identify the value of each indoor learning area and related the activities to the ELDAs. During the discussion, the participants affirmed some challenges that affected the planning of indoor learning areas in their centres.

Theme 3: Challenging conditions in rural Early Childhood Care and Education centres

Data showed that indoor learning areas were created while some challenging conditions were evident in other ECCE centres.

TABLE 2: The indoor learning spaces, activities and the related Early Learning Development Areas.

Indoor learning spaces	Planned activities and the available resources	The related ELDAs
Centre 1		
Construction corner	Colourful incomplete Lego pieces to construct objects, learn colours and play	Well-being Creativity Exploring mathematics Communication
Reading corner	Charts and pictures to read and learn	Exploring mathematics Communication Identity and belonging Knowledge and understanding of the world
Fantasy corner	Small kitchen including chairs and tables to fantasise and socialise	Identity and belonging Knowledge and understanding of the world
Centre 2		
Reading corner	Books for reading	Communication Exploring mathematics Identity and belonging Knowledge and understanding of the world
Fantasy corner	Resources to socialise: make-believe resources	Creativity Identity and belonging Knowledge and understanding of the world
Construction corner	Blocks for construction and other play resources	Well-being Creativity Exploring mathematics Communication
Centre 3		
Reading corner	Books to pretend reading. We also tell stories and talk with our children.	Communication Exploring mathematics Identity and belonging Knowledge and understanding of the world
Construction corner		Well-being Creativity Exploring mathematics Communication
Fantasy corner	Small kitchen equipment to fantasise	Well-being Communication Identity and belonging Knowledge and understanding of the world
Theme corner	Keep the theme-related resources	All the ELDAs

ELDAs, Early Learning Development Areas.

The participants mentioned that teaching and play resources and the floor space affected the creation of indoor learning areas in their centres. In that regard, said:

‘Although I am thankful that my children play and learn in different areas that I created, the classroom’s physical space is very small and the creation of indoor learning areas is affected.’ (T1-C1)

The same sentiments were shared from the same centre, who mentioned that:

‘While we make our own resources, those resources are not enough and the structure of the centre is incomplete.’ (T2-C1)

Similarly, to C1, a participant said:

‘We tried to create indoor learning areas for the children to play and learn the activities from the ELDAs. However, the classes are small, and the resources are very scarce.’ (T1-C3)

Although the participants create indoor learning areas, data showed that C1 and C3 shared similar challenges as the floor space was not enough while teaching and learning resources are usually scarce. They learned that indoor learning areas are identified by the resources organised in each area.

They shared their challenges and said:

‘While the floor space is enough, the community hall that we use does not allow us to create permanent indoor learning areas. After playing and learning with various resources, we move all the resources from the indoor learning areas to the store room every Friday afternoon. The venue [community hall] that we use as an ECCE centre is also used by the community during weekends.’ (T1-C2)

‘Every Monday, we take back the resources to create indoor learning areas, and it takes some time for us and our learners to re-prepare areas.’ (T2-C2)

It was evident from the aforementioned extracts that conditions of space significantly impacted the creation of indoor learning areas. That included teaching and play resources, especially in C1 and C3, where the classrooms were very small. While teachers from centre 1 were creative enough to make their resources, proper classrooms were not available in centre 2.

The six rural ECCE teachers who participated in this study initiated learning for change without any outside expert available for continuous support. They presented

self-direction as a learning effort to follow the NCF for young children's development. Teachers prepared themselves to engage in a new learning process. Based on their beliefs, they created learning opportunities to make meaning of the world around them, changed their outdated assumptions and adopted new ones that were relevant to their new experiences (Mezirow 2003). All the previous negative experiences transformed teachers' thinking for the better.

Discussions

This study explored rural ECCE teachers' experiences in creating indoor learning areas as the implementation of the NCF. The findings revealed that all the participants desired to learn and achieve the objectives of the NCF. Therefore, they created platforms to learn the NCF together and to create indoor learning areas in the interest of young children despite their challenges.

The positive intentions that were presented by the participants aligned with Wells (2014), who mentioned that collaborative learning practice is the attainment of quality teaching and learning. The six participants communicated with each other in their centres and collaborated to learn together. That was the case since some were unavailable for NCF training organised by the DBE in the area. The teachers' collaboration contrasts with Clasquin-Johnson's (2016) statement that teachers always need full support from the department officials for curriculum implementation and effective classroom practices. Moreover, this contradicts with the statement by Sun et al. (2015), who claim that teachers in rural ECCE centres lack planning ideas and professional skills to implement the official curriculum.

These rural ECCE teachers' learning practices supported change in the ECCE sector (Mezirow 2000). In comparison, Labuschagne (2015) found that rural ECCE teachers are usually identified as lacking planning skills. The six teachers worked together to achieve the objectives of the NCF. They committed to learning how to ensure that young children explore the activities from the ELDAs of the NCF. The six participants maintained the TLT as they transformed their planning practices in the interest of young children.

The findings revealed that the participants considered conducive indoor learning areas for the holistic development of young children (Meier & Marais 2018). The participants in all three centres identified reading corners, fantasy corners and construction corners. However, centre 3 also included a theme corner where the teachers keep the theme-related resources after teaching. Similar to Chepkonga (2017), ECCE teachers organised learning resources that outline the activities for young children to meet their developmental needs in each area. They also created opportunities for young children to see, touch, play and learn (DBE 2015) in different organised areas indoors. The participants planned indoor learning areas, identified teaching and learning resources and the activities related to the ELDAs, which are presented in Table 2. All the

participants emphasised the importance of safe resources for young children to learn as they play with a clear understanding of each area's value. Safe teaching and play materials were considered (DBE 2015).

The findings counter to Labuschagne's (2015) claim that teachers exclusively create indoor areas based on the physical structure of the classroom and the availability of teaching and learning resources that are scarce in rural centres. Instead, all the participants in this study were committed to achieving the objectives of the NCF. They also showed a clear understanding of the value of each area and young children's interests with all the challenges they encountered.

Conclusion

The study found that the six teachers created a conducive learning environment as a collaborative learning effort to achieve the objectives of the NCF in their three rural ECCE centres. The new experience in the ECCE sector suggests that while there are still some challenges in rural ECCE centres, change is apparent. As explained in the document, the NCF transformed ECCE teachers' practices to consider themselves as capable adults who can share skills for young children to learn. This study challenged the discourse that rural teachers lack the knowledge to design learning spaces that strengthen early learning to reach curriculum goals.

Recommendations

This article recommends more collaborations in a wider rural context for the rural ECCE teachers to share their competencies. Further learning and the development of creative planning skills are also encouraged. This suggests the formation of Communities of Practice for more collective learning for teachers to learn and solve common challenges together.

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Author's contributions

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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