



THE ROLE OF ALE IN SUPPORTING MATURE WOMEN WORKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT



Kayianne Aploon-Zokufa is a lecturer in the Institute for Post-School Studies (IPSS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in the Faculty of Education. She holds a PhD in adult education, with a specific focus on Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners' learning pathways and access into higher education. Before she joined UWC, she completed a Master's degree in Curriculum Studies at the University of Cape Town. Her interest shifted to adult learning during a six-year period of teaching, training, and facilitating Adult Education and Training programmes in workplaces and ECD programmes at Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges. Kayianne is currently steering a research project that investigates the social organisation of knowledge in 14 ECD centres in the Western Cape. The project aims to provide knowledge and understanding around the nature of teaching and learning in the critical area of ECD.



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Introduction

This article focuses on mature¹ women in the Western Cape, South Africa who work as Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners and is based on a survey of 51 women, life history interview data from eleven participants, and four in-depth case studies (Aploon-Zokufa & Papier, 2024). Despite an ongoing struggle to access higher education, the women participated in formal and non-formal adult education learning opportunities in order to 'make their lives' and build sustainable livelihoods as educators and caregivers. The article explores the ways in which Adult Learning and Education (ALE) contributes to an ECD 'community of practice' in a country with high unemployment, where many, particularly women, continue to live in poverty. The article shows how ALE supports women's livelihood development which positively impacts families and communities.

Context

In South Africa women who work as ECD practitioners face a variety of challenges. They are materially poor and marginalised; live and work in harsh social and economic conditions; have limited opportunities for professional teacher development; experience job insecurity; and have limited access to higher education. Recent research shows large numbers of ECD practitioners aim to access the B.Ed (Foundation Phase) programme at universities in order to become teachers in basic schooling (Aploon-Zokufa & Papier, 2024). However, they are denied access due to their age and/or because they do not meet the admission requirements for their preferred university programmes (Aploon-Zokufa & Papier, 2024). The ECD sector is filled with women who start working in ECD centres as volunteers, with limited to no formal qualifications. As part of their participation in these centres they access ECD Level 1, Level 4 or Level 5 programmes at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges².



Photo by Road Ahead (Unsplash).

Background

Fifty-one women residing in lower-income areas in the Western Cape responded to a survey that sought to understand the context of their lives and work opportunities as ECD practitioners. According to the survey, they tried to gain entry into higher education (many for five consecutive years) without much success. Life history interviews were completed with 11 of the survey respondents and four in-depth case studies were done in order to map out learning pathways of mature women in this sector. The women volunteered or worked as ECD practitioners in their own or neighbouring communities, fulfilling roles such as principal, teacher, and teacher assistant. Some of them worked as Grade R teachers or teacher assistants in contract positions in the Foundation Phase of primary school. Many entered the ECD sector because it was often the only form of employment available in their communities, and the only opportunity that allowed them to volunteer in the hope of securing employment one day. In her life history interview, Ruth stated: 'I went to the Principal and asked if I could volunteer there at the ECD centre and she allowed me to do that; and I had a friend who told me about a college offering ECD courses, learnerships, and then I went there. I was volunteering when I received this letter to say I have been accepted there - at the college'. Similarly, Elethu said: 'I heard about this

programme from a friend - through social media - who also did it'.

TVET colleges offer adult learning programmes in the form of ECD Level 1, ECD Level 4 and ECD Level 5. These programmes are learnerships for people working in ECD without the necessary qualifications to do so. Participants in these programmes are often volunteers in centres, such as Ruth.

Prior to entering ECD, the respondents to the survey had worked as security guards, cashiers, call centre agents, and factory machine operators. They had participated in short courses or had done non-formal training in their communities, such as first aid training, management skills, fetal alcohol syndrome training, and computer training. A few (four of the 11 women interviewed) had gained access to higher education through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).³

What the women have gained

The opportunities afforded to the women to participate in ALE strengthened their self-confidence, gave them greater purpose, and brought hope to their lives. Some, like Elethu, found a career path in the field of education: 'I fell in love, because yes, I [had] a baby that time, yes ... but I never thought that I will want to work

with children. That's where I started to design programmes [for the children in the centre], that's where I started to help them in their activities. This is a journey that I never thought I would be on, now that I'm working here, I must bring change. There's a lot that I can do, especially now that I'm given this opportunity to be a principal'.

Surreya, who has a child with special needs, said: 'I started helping out at the school to assist him because he was a bit ... I was worried about my child, and this is how I got into wanting to [study] education. I really want to do special needs - this is what I'm aiming for. So, I went through with him to the centre, trying to really help him, figuring out [how to help him] ... with the stuttering and the speech [challenges]'.

Referring to the children that she teaches, Chuleza said: 'I want them to become better leaders. So, with the foundation that I give, I feel like they can be whatever they want to be in life. And with the experience, with the knowledge that I have, I want to share the knowledge. I want to share the experience with them so that they can become better leaders'.

Chuleza also stated: 'Yes, I'm so happy where I am right now, and I really think maybe I was supposed to be a teacher'.

Some negative experiences

While many women had positive experiences through gaining qualifications and working in the ECD sector, some also encountered negative experiences which led them to not want to stay in the ECD sector permanently. These are to do with conditions of service. In her interview, Chuleza said: 'I want to get a job. I don't want to work in the centre. Please, I want to be in a school. People working in centres, they don't get money, or in the specific place there they must wait, or maybe they don't even get [paid]. Even if they get [paid], they get small money'.

Lithemba also shared her experience of working in the sector: 'I worked for a year in 2017. Teachers went on strike for monies from October, November and December. I worked for those three months without payment. I got payment in December and January. They were supposed to open the school on the 22nd and then the Principal, said: 'We



must open on the 20th for registration'. We went there and the teachers were on strike, querying their money. Then they just closed the gate and said they no longer need us'.

Communities of Practice

The women in this study were employed by fellow materially poor and marginalised women who had started ECD centres on their own. Through their shared interests and learning, the centre owners and practitioners became a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Their *social learning* included such things as establishing and managing ECD centres, and learning how to create sustainable learning environments for young children. Participants also made use of shared resources and tools to support early learning. Through regular interaction, participants engaged in collaborative activities, exchanged experiences and information, co-constructed knowledge, and supported one another in their learning journey.

All of the women in this study learned about ECD programmes, RPL and other aspects around teaching in centres, as well as how children learn, via word of mouth, from others who were also ECD practitioners. Social learning theory suggests that learning is a social process which occurs through interaction and participation within a community. It emphasises the role of social interactions, apprenticeship, and situated learning⁴ in knowledge acquisition and skill development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978).

Benefits - individuals, families, communities

ALE has offered meaningful support to the women at a personal level by helping them grow and develop in their knowledge, skills, and confidence. Despite the deep challenges of poverty and unemployment, they have been able to secure livelihoods. The women have enhanced their ability to support

and sustain their households, and this has had a positive impact on their families and communities, and, in a small but meaningful way, contributed to economic development. Some women have started their own ECD centres - this has not only been about self-empowerment and improving early learning outcomes for children, but also about creating much-needed employment opportunities for other ECD practitioners. The women strive towards sustainability for themselves and their families - Serrat (2017) defines this as individuals, households, and communities having the ability to better their living conditions in the face of hardship and adversity while considering their well-being and that of future generations. Ruth stated: 'My children and children's children, they are not going to struggle'.

Although the women face challenges in accessing higher education, their participation in non-formal and formal adult education and training programmes enables them to participate in the ECD sector. Though the sector is in crisis (Atmore, Van Niekerk & Ashley-Cooper, 2012), the women have been able to transition from being unemployed to becoming ECD practitioners, bringing with them knowledge and skills needed to contribute meaningfully to the field.

Conclusion

The experiences of the women involved in the study show how important ALE is in supporting the growth of knowledge, skills, and confidence of materially poor, marginalised people. It also helps in the building of livelihoods and contributes to economic development, albeit in limited ways. Although the women struggle to access formal education such as the B.Ed, they use formal and non-formal learning opportunities to forge a path from unemployment to becoming ECD educators with the ability to make a difference. Their learning journeys highlight the value and need for adult education and training, especially for women living in poverty. Although ALE remains on the margins, it continues to offer hope to communities and empower those excluded from mainstream social and economic development. The women's stories deepen our understanding of ALE's transformative impact.

Endnotes

- 1 Women who are 24 years and older, have not completed high school, and have family and work responsibilities - they have dependants for whom they must care while they participate in education which is via a non-traditional pathway or learning route, such as a night school (Chen, 2014; Kasworm, 2018).
- 2 NQF Level 1 is equivalent to Grade 9; Level 4 to Grade 12 and Level 5 is often associated with Higher Certificates and the first year of a bachelor's degree or National Diploma.
- 3 RPL is a process used to identify and acknowledge the knowledge and skills a person has gained through life, including outside formal education. This recognition can help one gain access to undergraduate or postgraduate study programmes.
- 4 Situated learning is about the connection between learning and a particular space, time and people (the social situation). The learning cannot be separated from the situation/context in which it happens.

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