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Prof Mariette Koen – Community-Based Educational Research (COMBER), Faculty of Education, North-West University, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Jacqueline Akhurst
J.Akhurst@ru.ac.za

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Research Article

Meeting early childhood learners' needs through partnership work between adults in South Africa: Potentials to promote systemic change

Authors: Jacqueline Akhurst[1], Anneliese Maritz[1], Carl Wurz[1]

Affiliation: [1] Psychology Department, Rhodes University, South Africa

Abstract

Meeting early childhood development (ECD) needs potentially contributes to strengthening community communication and bonds, contributing to breaking cycles of poverty by building stronger foundations for life. In this article, we report on two recent case studies conducted in Eastern Cape (South Africa) ECD settings. We aim to illustrate the impact of the interventions and advocate for possible system changes to better address learners' needs. In this unequal context, many systemic challenges hinder implementation, where learners present with diverse and extensive needs. The research question probed the utilisation of an educational partnership approach within the ECD space. The studies utilised action research methods in their design, with each progressing through six action cycles. The researchers trialled parent-practitioner partnerships with participants from three ECD centres across two settings (one urban and one rural) to promote involvement and two-way communication. Working collaboratively with parents and educators who volunteered to participate, the researchers explored possibilities for changes in practice to improve home-school interactions. Both projects demonstrate the benefits of partnerships with parents in the ECD system, given the difficulties practitioners face in under-resourced settings. The two case studies show adults gaining greater agency and communicating more effectively (for example, parents working with educators and educators networking across different centres). The common emergent themes provide evidence of the potential for beneficial changes through partnership work, building collaboratively on people's combined knowledge of local contexts and circumstances.

Keywords: early childhood development; action research in ECD; home-school partnerships; parent-teacher communication; ECD case studies.

Introduction

Research has overwhelmingly shown the importance of early childhood as a critical stage of development for socio-emotional, cognitive and regulatory skills and competencies, which have a lifelong impact on adaptation and functioning (Housman, 2017). Compromised early childhood development in South Africa (SA), due to circumstances of poverty and disadvantage, may be one of the primary contributing factors leading to current disappointing educational outcomes (Mahadew, 2024). Early childhood development (ECD) interventions have been shown to have a positive impact on children's social, cognitive, and emotional realms (Bianchi et al., 2022). ECD is the preferred term in government policy and is used as an all-inclusive, integrative term in SA (Nharara & Ndlovu, 2025).

An early research project on the outskirts of Cape Town (Short, 1985) illustrated the important role that an ECD program can play in a disadvantaged community, since many adults are invested in contributing to children's needs. A recent United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2023) report collated research highlighting the value of investing in ECD to secure children's rights and build strong foundations for their futures. ECD programs can build more resilient communities by strengthening communication and bonds, improving access to early interventions, and creating economic benefits that break cycles of poverty. In contrast, failing to provide children with responsive caregiving and adequate early learning experiences perpetuates cycles of disadvantage, undermining national strength, stability, and prosperity (Du Toit et al., 2021).

Practices that improve ECD provision have been shown to enhance school readiness, with cumulative effects on school achievement and, subsequently, adult earnings (Burchinal & Vandell, 2025). Internationally, investing in ECD is therefore viewed as critical to put countries "on the path to greater prosperity, and to … be more productive and compete more successfully in a rapidly changing global economy" (World Bank, 2024). Programs should focus upon children's holistic well-being through access to quality ECD, and UNICEF (2023) particularly cites the efficacy of programs that integrate support for parents and caregivers. Parenting styles as well as the level and type of involvement in the child's education are important influences on early childhood development and appear to be a primary protective factor in the face of multiple stressors in low-income families, leading to greater cognitive and emotional resilience in children (Cooper et al., 2009; Du Toit et al., 2021).

Draper et al. (2024) highlighted the need for more research into focused interventions in low- and middle-income countries, since "the most vulnerable children are not benefiting" (p. 617) from the evidence being gathered. A recent scoping review by Beukes et al. (2025) also emphasised the dearth of evidence on ECD programs in Sub-Saharan Africa, where most interventions have focused on nutrition. Post-apartheid, after 1994, ECD's contributions to child development in SA have gained attention, with recent policies supporting practitioner training (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2017) and educational re-organisation highlighting the government's current recognition of its importance (Mahadew, 2024). There has been a recent shift in ECD oversight, with the whole phase having been relocated in 2024 from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE), moving its focus from child-care to educative intent, and aiming to achieve universal access to two years of quality pre-school education by 2030 (DBE, 2023). The DBE (2023) document also highlights the important efforts of parents and caregivers in difficult circumstances, hoping to build on and enhance these skills.

ECD intersects education, social work, and healthcare systems (Van Vuuren, 2022). To build the capacities of parents and caregivers and drive systemic change, it is therefore important to focus on community-based ECD initiatives and propose ways to scale them up (Short, 1985). The research context of this article is two impoverished communities in the predominantly rural Eastern Cape (EC) province of SA. The extensive geography and a history of poor governance in the EC have led to many systemic challenges, including the lack of provision of adequate health and education services, resulting in many learners

whose needs have not been met (Van Vuuren, 2022). This article explores two recent EC partnership research studies conducted in ECD settings. Its objectives are to illustrate their reported impacts on parents, caregivers and educators, and to motivate for changes that might be possible within systems, to better meet learners' needs.

Context and Policy Responses: ECD and Community Health

The EC province illustrates the SA tensions between capitalist urban economies and more rural development needs, as well as the inequalities evident between those previously politically privileged during apartheid and the majority who experienced oppression (Mavimbela, 2025; Westaway, 2012). The EC is a geographically extensive province, having the second-largest landmass in the country (with 800km of coastline), including two former apartheid "homelands", thus characterised by elevated poverty rates, infrastructural deficits and widespread food insecurity. Underdeveloped infrastructure and extensive rural areas limit economic growth, with high unemployment and more than 70% of people living below the upper-bound poverty line (Majikijela et al., 2025). Many households are reliant on social grants and face multiple challenges that affect children's development (Pepper, 2017). Children may often arrive at school hungry, with limited exposure to age-appropriate books or play materials. Parents or caregivers may find schools intimidating or distant, especially when school language and culture differ from their homes (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019). These conditions intensify the urgency for interventions that not only improve access to and enhance quality ECD but also mobilise and value the diverse social and cultural capital present in families and communities (Ebrahim, 2024).

Internationally, previous studies have illustrated the potential benefits of ECD for community health. A United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) report (Bianchi et al., 2022) emphasises the interconnectedness of education, health, care and development for children under eight. Taking a rights-based approach, the report cites research illustrating the importance of early educational experiences (whether in ECD facilities or the home) that shape brain development, including enhancing conceptual skills and the cognitive aspects of language and literacy through play; executive skills such as self-regulation, concentration and self-confidence; and social competences like turn-taking and developing empathy for others. Such skill development may then have wider effects on family and community communication and engagement. In child-centred ECD settings that offer routines and stimulation, children can develop a lifelong enjoyment of learning, enhance school readiness and support longer-term school progress. Supporting and involving caregivers can strengthen bonds with children and improve family relationships, increasing community responsibility for children's well-being and reducing social problems.

Bianchi et al. (2022) further emphasise that due to their dependence on both caregivers and state provision, for children under eight there is a need for a multisectoral approach, with policies that are integrated and holistic. However, the Beukes et al. (2025) scoping review highlighted that Sub-Saharan ECD research appeared to neglect important aspects like early learning and responsive caregiving. Ebrahim (2024) supports this, emphasising that research following Western models neglects the value of indigenous childcare knowledge in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Draper et al. (2024) also note the substantial variations in emphasis on such care dimensions as "… nutrition, protection, responsive care, and learning" (p. 2094) across LMICs.

There has been a progressive recognition in post-1994 South African policy of the importance of ECD. It is covered in a series of governmental White Papers, the Children's Act (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2005), leading to a National Integrated ECD Policy (RSA, 2015), and being part of the National Development Plan (RSA, 2016), which aims to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030. More specifically, the National Curriculum Framework provides policy and direction

for early learning and care (DSD, 2015; DBE, 2015), with recent changes to departmental responsibilities for its provision and a greater emphasis on supporting learning. Each document emphasises parents' roles as primary caregivers, with integrated services, parental support, and provision to enhance early learning in both home and centre-based settings. These documents promote participatory, partnership-oriented governance structures that include parents and caregivers. However, these policies offer limited guidance on how practitioners can build culturally responsive, trust-based relationships with parents. This is especially true in lower-income communities, where more authoritarian styles of the past might predominate due to educational differences, characterised by power imbalances and historical mistrust of institutions by parents or caregivers (Singh et al., 2004; Okeke, 2014). Therefore, educational partnerships based on participatory approaches that value stakeholder involvement need to be developed and refined to better serve community needs.

Educational Partnerships in ECD in South Africa

Globally, educational partnership terminology and meanings differ across contexts. However, most agree that these provide a space for parents (or caregivers) and educators to build relationships that "create optimal conditions for children's development and learning in the context of school and family" (Janssen-Vos & Weijers, 2012, p. 167). Makunga et al. (2017) emphasise the shared visions and practices that characterise partnerships. Literature covering home-school partnerships in SA ECD identifies a notable shift from school-centric involvement to more democratic, inclusive models of participation and co-learning (Connelly et al., 2024). This shift positions parents and practitioners as partners in "horizontal dialogues", bringing complementary expertise to a shared community of practice, valuing the unique knowledge of stakeholders regarding children, language, and local context (Ebrahim, 2024).

Current research emphasises that effective partnerships are rooted in mutual learning rather than a one-way transfer of information from school to home (Ebrahim, 2024). Participation is increasingly framed within theoretical frameworks that include humanising pedagogy (e.g., Freire, 1970) and build more democratic relationships that avoid oppression and acknowledge potential power imbalances in organisations (Ebersöhn & Malan-Van Rooyen, 2018). This approach is often underpinned by the concept of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where parents and teachers acknowledge each other's skills and learn with and from one another, encouraging stakeholders to listen to one another, foster meaningful connections, and potentially empower participants (Connelly et al., 2024). Teachers and parents are encouraged to engage in open, honest communication, allowing both parties to feel empowered to help each other. High-quality partnerships are reciprocal processes in which parents and educators combine resources to build mutual capacity (Jacobs, 2024). This includes practitioners learning about children's lives at home to create more meaningful classroom activities, and, in turn, parents learning about activities they can include at home.

The literature positions parents and practitioners as having distinct but equally valuable expertise essential to a child's success (Ebrahim, 2024). Parents are recognised as their children's first educators and the primary authority on their child's specific needs, personality, and developmental histories. Parents have intimate knowledge of their children and often assert that they know their child better than anyone else at school (Connelly et al., 2024). Practitioners acknowledge that they need to work with parents because parents help them learn more about the child and provide effective support (Jacobs, 2024).

A key theme in the South African context is decolonising parental participation by valuing communities' cultural wealth and indigenous knowledge systems (Ebrahim, 2024; Jacobs, 2024). Families develop linguistic capital, which includes proficiency in home languages and the ability to navigate different linguistic contexts (Du Toit et al., 2021). Literacy is rooted in home experience, and family literacy programs aim to bridge home and school literacy (Jacobs, 2024). Parents also bring

familial capital - the cultural knowledge, history, and memory cultivated within families. This often aligns with the philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises a shared identity and the idea that the community becomes stronger through what members contribute to and learn from one another (Connelly et al., 2024).

Practitioners and parents are encouraged to work together to navigate the specific challenges and assets of their local environments, particularly in lower socio-economic settings (Connelly et al., 2024), where partnerships must be context-friendly, considering the sociocultural and economic challenges parents face, such as unemployment or safety concerns (Sibanda, 2021). Successful models value families' cultural wealth and move away from a deficit view that labels impoverished families as uninvolved. Instead, practitioners are encouraged to draw on families' funds of knowledge (Ebrahim, 2024), the historically accumulated skills and expertise essential to household functioning and well-being (Jacobs, 2024).

Despite the move toward partnership-building, several barriers remain to developing educational partnerships (Esterhuizen et al., 2023; Makunga et al., 2017). Educators may believe parents are uninterested or that teaching is solely the school's job (Sibanda, 2021); many parents also report that educators are unapproachable (Esterhuizen et al., 2023). Traditional, authoritarian approaches can also persist, with unconstructive power dynamics treating parents as inferior rather than as equal partners (Cilliers et al., 2026; Connelly et al., 2024). Teacher education may also have gaps, with many practitioners feeling unprepared to engage effectively with families from marginalised or diverse backgrounds (Jacobs, 2024).

The literature thus advocates ongoing, iterative, and democratic partnership models (Connelly et al., 2024; Ebrahim, 2024), but few examples of these are in practice in the SA literature. Rather than positioning parents as passive recipients of expert knowledge, the approach frames parents and practitioners as co-learners who bring complementary expertise about children, language, and local context (Ebersöhn & Malan-van Rooyen, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The studies reported were situated within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory (1979), recognising the importance of the child's expanded microsystem in ECD (parents, educators, community members), which supports the child's development through partnerships (Lemmer, 2007). Further, the studies were anchored in the constructivist paradigm, employing participatory principles from community psychology (Visser et al., 2022), informed by socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Rooted in the interconnectedness between thinking and language (Vygotsky, 1962), and his proposals that knowledge becomes accessible through interactions between everyday (spontaneous) and scholarly concepts, the emphasis was on the cultural tools in children's environments. When children from low-income backgrounds enter school, the system may misinterpret differences in cultural tools as deficits in capability, since formal education systems are typically built around the tools of the dominant middle class (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on mediated learning and the zone of proximal development foregrounds the centrality of adult–child interactions, collaborative problem-solving, and the importance of mediating tools such as language and play in early development. All of these ideas were foregrounded in and informed the programs described below.

Engeström (2001) developed Vygotsky's concepts of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), demonstrating that learning is enhanced through collective, tool-mediated, object-oriented activities. The collective of interested participants is multi-voiced in that it represents different viewpoints and interests, and thus historically accumulated and systemic contradictions are surfaced through discursive methods (Winberg et al., 2023). The methods aim to uncover and deepen understanding of different perspectives and work with contradictions to develop new learning.

Community psychology, especially in its more critical forms, prioritises work towards greater social justice. Through researcher collaboration with community members, collaborative approaches and mutual capacity-building, it advocates research "with" rather than "on" communities and supports interventionist, participatory methodologies, including various forms of action research (Visser et al., 2022).

The notion of educational partnerships described above is exemplified by the Netherlands' "Thuis in School" (Home in School) project (Iliás et al., 2019). Adapted versions of these ideas are central to both case studies below, where asset-based approaches build on participants' cultural capital rather than focusing on deficits (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020).

Rationale for the Studies

Given the exploration above, the pressing need for research into ECD interventions becomes evident, particularly those that involve parents and caregivers in partnership with practitioners, to enhance children's learning. In the two studies that follow, we aimed to investigate the development and use of educational partnership approaches in these specific ECD settings. This article aims to illustrate how concrete, localised partnership interventions might reshape practices in homes and ECD centres, supporting the national implementation of recent policy shifts and community development. The overarching research question that we hope to provide some answers to is: "How might an educational partnership approach with ECD parents and educators be developed and utilised to support the learning and development of pre-school children?"

Methods

The two case studies described below were based on the constructivist paradigm, with interventionist and action research methods informing the design. Working collaboratively with parents and educators, the researchers explored possibilities for changes in practice. The researchers trialled parent-practitioner partnerships across two EC settings (one more urban and the other rural) to promote parental involvement and two-way knowledge exchange, as recommended by Ebrahim (2024). We hoped an action-based, interventionist approach would drive positive change.

This article employs a multiple case study approach (Creswell, 1998) with two context-bounded cases and a series of successive group meetings. Each case was developed in a separate PhD study with a two-year gap between the interventions. The first author supervised both, and similarities in their outcomes became apparent only after each study was independently completed and analysed. The first program was conducted in late 2019, before the COVID-19 lockdowns, and the second in 2021, after the pandemic subsided. Early in 2026, the first author facilitated a couple of online meetings with the other authors so they could first describe their findings to each other, and then we could collaboratively identify the similarities that became evident during the discussions. In the case studies, we describe the development of the partnerships and their outcomes to identify participants' experiences and the impacts they reported. First, we present the in-case analyses; then we provide a between-case summary of similarities.

The Institutional Ethical Research Committee (RUESC 2019-0365-462 and RUHEC 2021-4941-6058) provided ethical clearance for both studies, with particular attention to protecting participants; data collection via audio and video; and data storage to ensure confidentiality and protect participants' anonymity during the research. Once institutional permissions were granted and the relevant organisations gave written assent, researchers recruited participants by verbally describing the groups at a meeting for those interested, with informal encouragement to participate. This was followed by formal written

informed consent procedures. All participants were interviewed pre-intervention for family and educational information, and to initially provide examples of topics that they hoped would be covered in the groups.

In both studies, we adopted action research as a flexible, cyclical approach that could respond to emergent issues and participant priorities (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The action research cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) were operationalised through a series of structured dialogical sessions that were planned to integrate collective explorations, visual materials, and practical home-based activities, utilising a reflection model in the first case study (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2022) and ideas from expansive learning to inform the engagements in the second (Engeström, 2001). The evolving action research processes were documented after each session by re-listening to the session audio recordings and using the Summary on a Page (SoaP) methodology (Akhurst & Lawson, 2013), which makes explicit the planning and reflections of each cycle and their influence on the following cycle. These SoaPs provided the details given in the first parts of the case study descriptions below. Then, post-intervention participant interviews were separately analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2022) by the second and third authors as part of their original studies, to provide participant feedback from which we have drawn to illustrate their responses to their experiences.

In each study, one action research group was structured by the project lead to meet regularly over a number of weeks, with participants actively encouraged to contribute to discussions and decisions in the evolving research. In both instances, participants' contributions were initially more limited than we had hoped, due to their lack of experience with the methodology and possible shyness or intimidation by the facilitator's ethnic difference, as Van der Riet and Boettiger (2009) also noted. Participants became more actively engaged as the cycles evolved (through 6 or 7 fortnightly meetings), realising their contributions were valued, a form of collaborative action research (Akhurst, 2022). The parent participants were not involved in co-researcher tasks between meetings, although at each meeting parents and practitioners jointly agreed on topics to be covered in the next.

The positionality of the respective project leads in each case study differed on the continuum proposed by Herr and Anderson (2015). In the first study, the co-ordinator was an insider, working with a practitioner (also an insider), but with parents and a translator who were outsiders. In the second case, the co-ordinator and parents were outsiders, working with volunteer insiders (ECD practitioners). These different positionalities shaped the nature of inquiry, although both aimed for broader community engagement through the participants. Reflexivity was enhanced by co-facilitator meetings at the beginning of the next day in the first case study (a form of "member checking"). In both studies, rigour was enhanced through immediate transcription; reflexive journalling; SoaP development before the next group meeting; and the lead facilitator consulting with the supervisor (first author) between each group cycle to reduce bias.

Findings

The two case studies below focus on home- and school-based activities such as routines, chores, and reading, and illustrate how building partnerships seemed to benefit the ECD centres, adults, and children.

Case Study I

Educational Partnership in a Multilingual Centre

Study 1 was conducted at an urban ECD centre that serves children from predominantly low-income, isiXhosa- and Afrikaans-speaking communities (Maritz, 2022). The centre is intentionally multilingual, with two qualified practitioners (isiXhosa- and Afrikaans-speaking) who also speak English, and it draws children from areas where unemployment, poor housing, and limited services are pervasive (Pepper, 2017). Many families rely on social grants, and donor bursaries fund ECD fees, highlighting the interplay between food insecurity, impoverished housing, access, and organisational support.

Eight parents participated, including three couples, allowing a rare focus on fathers' involvement in a sector where female caregivers often predominate. The parents varied in linguistic and educational background: some had completed Grade 12, while others had limited literacy skills and left school as early as Grade 2.

Table 1

Participants in Each Cycle of the Multilingual ECD Centre Program (Case Study I)

Participant Identifier	Role	Age Range	Home Language	Educational Level Attained
PA	Parent	30s	isiXhosa	Grade 2
PB	Parent	40s	Afrikaans	Grade 7
PC	Parent	30s	Afrikaans	Grade 8
PD	Parent	20s	Afrikaans	Grade 12
PE	Parent	20s	Afrikaans	Grade 12
PF	Parent	30s	Afrikaans	Grade 10
PG	Parent	30s	Afrikaans	Grade 2
PH	Parent	40s	Afrikaans	Grade 7
PI	Practitioner/co-facilitator	40s	Afrikaans	Postgraduate degree
PJ	Practitioner/co-facilitator	30s	Afrikaans	TVET Level 5
PK	Translator/co-facilitator	40s	isiXhosa	Postgraduate degree

The co-facilitation team comprised one practitioner, the ECD coordinator (a registered social worker and the lead researcher), and an isiXhosa translator. This team met before the first session to plan the activities and would subsequently meet the following morning after each session to debrief, reflect and then plan based upon their experiences of the previous session. The team carefully managed ethical considerations, including using participants' first languages, using illustrative photographs and videos of children whose parents had given permission, and paying attention to ways to reduce power differentials (for example, through break-away groups), given the coordinator's managerial role in the centre. The latter topic was always considered reflectively in relation to the co-facilitators reviewing the audio and video recordings following each session.

The intervention took the form of iStoep Talk sessions, titled from the Afrikaans word "stoep" (veranda) with the isiXhosa prefix "i-", evoking the practice of informal, relaxed conversations on a veranda. This emphasised the inclusion of parents as knowledgeable partners in their child's development. Six structured workshops (around two hours long) combined reflective dialogue, visual materials, demonstration, and planning of home-based activities, guided by action research principles and activity ideas from the Thuis in School project (Iliás et al., 2019). Topics were negotiated with participants at the end of each preceding session and covered themes such as getting to know one another, supporting learning through play, pretend reading and writing, routines, and setting age-appropriate boundaries to support children's confidence and self-regulation.

Photographs from home and school, storybooks, "play" writing examples, encouraging emotional expression, and demonstrating the use of reward charts were prompts to elicit discussion and convert theoretical ideas to everyday practices. Mutual discussions encouraged knowledge sharing, such as a practitioner's insights on self-regulation. In another example, when a parent mentioned their child's love for music at home, the practitioner subsequently adapted classroom activities to include more musical engagement.

In the resulting account (Maritz, 2022), data-based vignettes introduced individual family contexts and captured parents' initial beliefs and practices from the pre-group interviews, while SoaPs summarised each session's content and process. Several themes emerged from the SoaPs and, particularly, the post-intervention feedback interviews (conducted five months after the program ended and in the new year), illustrating the value and challenges of educational partnerships in this multilingual ECD setting.

Communication and trust: More frequent and richer communication resulted between parents and practitioners, including bidirectional sharing of concerns, ideas, and feedback on children's progress (a couple termed it "*checking in*" (PE & PF) with the school). In the feedback, a parent commented that for them "*Yoh, there was a lot of things, but the most important aspect was the communication with the school*" (PE). This is an example of parents reporting feeling more welcome at the centre, better able to ask questions, and feeling less intimidated. The practitioner noted: *"... we need to work hand in hand with the parents because they will assist me to learn more about their child, so it makes my job much easier*" (PJ), showing that practitioners recognised parents' contextual expertise. They began adjusting communication strategies, including language choice and concrete examples, to improve understanding.

Boundary-setting and emotional support: Sessions focusing on boundaries and emotional regulation led parents to experiment with age-appropriate, non-violent strategies such as using reward charts, visual emotion drawings and consistent routines, which they perceived as helping children become more confident and cooperative. In their post-program interviews, three of the parents independently mentioned that they had learnt strategies to avoid shouting as much at their children, for example, "*listening to my child and not always shouting at him*" (PA). A parent commented that they had learnt about children going to bed early "*... otherwise they battle to concentrate the next morning*" (PD). Practitioners reported that parents' increased consistency at home made it easier to manage behaviour and learning in the classroom, underscoring the reciprocity developing through the program.

Parents' roles and agency: Initially, parents saw the centre as principally responsible for their child's learning. Over the course of iStoep sessions, parents began to understand their roles as their child's "*first teachers*" (PE), reporting improved confidence in reading, playing, and talking with children, and initiating new routines such as daily shared reading or structured household chores as learning opportunities. One commented that he learnt "*the most from practical ways that you could play with your child*" (PH) and another parent said it "*... helped a lot in 'how' to spend time with your children and 'how' to interact with them – you really learn – those mistakes you made become less*" (PD). The practitioner also noted that they felt that the information would help parents *"... to know how to support their child and it will help them to understand and then they will have more patience with their child – it will open their eyes and also towards the school*" (PJ). The participants were quiet at the beginning, and facilitators needed to take the lead. However, as soon as the group split into smaller discussion groups, participation increased, and as the program evolved, they became more active and changed their understanding of their roles.

Language and cultural practices: Multilingualism surfaced as both an initial challenge but was then seen as an asset. Parents and practitioners needed to navigate multiple languages at home and at school. At the beginning, the practitioner shared that: "*within their community they spoke 'kombuis' (kitchen) Afrikaans, which is more casual*" (PJ). This emphasised that some of the wording of the activities needed to be explained more simply. However, since all were encouraged to speak in their first language (through encouragement and provision of translators), each session included enthusiastic conversations. The translator commented that for PA, being "*uneducated, she loved that she was being accommodated as the only isiXhosa-speaking parent*" (PK). This also seemed to help participants feel their needs were acknowledged and to relax. iStoep conversations highlighted how everyday language practices and cultural routines (e.g., storytelling, religious practices, extended family caregiving) could be reframed as valuable learning experiences.

Study I demonstrated how a participatory, theory-informed partnership model could shift both discourse and practice around early learning, parenting, and communication in a multilingual ECD setting in a disadvantaged community, albeit as a small-scale project. We planned to replicate it the following year to deepen our understanding; however, COVID-19 intervened and prevented this. In their post-program interviews, the parent participants reported feeling more confident communicating with educators when their children moved to primary school and coping better during the COVID-19 lockdown periods because of the activities and ideas shared in the sessions.

Case Study II

Parent–Practitioner Partnerships Across Two ECD Centres

This study was conducted in a relatively remote rural EC village (a four-hour journey from the university) in 2021, served by two ECD centres. Due to similarities in the environmental and socio-economic contexts, the participants joined together in one interactive group, facilitated in Afrikaans - the first language of both the researcher and the participants. The larger ECD centre was resource-constrained, without a well-developed curriculum (at that time under the jurisdiction of the DSD), while the other followed a well-developed and better resourced (Montessori) curriculum.

Table 2

Participants from the combined ECD Centres Program (Case study II)

Participant Number	Role (Parent, Educator, Co-facilitator)	Age Range	Home Language	Education Level Attained
P2	Educator	20s	Afrikaans	TVET Level 4
P8	Educator	20s	Afrikaans	Grade 12
P11	Parent	20s	Afrikaans	Grade 11
P12	Parent	20s	Afrikaans	Grade 10
P13	Parent	30s	Afrikaans	Grade 12
P14	Parent	20s	Afrikaans	Grade 9
P15	Parent	20s	Afrikaans	Grade 12
P17	Parent	30s	Afrikaans	Grade 9

A total of seventeen participants were recruited (though we have only drawn from eight of the post-program interviews for this case study), including the principals of both schools and all teaching staff, as well as several parents from both schools and a current board member of the Montessori school. As a psychologist in private practice, the researcher was skilled in play therapy with children.

The analysis of data generated by pre-intervention ethnographic interviews indicated the problem areas that were impacting ECD outcomes in the community. The researcher presented and discussed these problem areas at the first workshop; however, people initially seemed reluctant to comment or share opinions. Participants then voted by pencil and paper on the listed topics, and those ranked highest became the focus of the following workshops. We recorded discussions during each workshop and subsequently analysed and reviewed them, then followed up with input to the group at the next workshop. This produced rich descriptions of each problem area, and participants often recognised solutions without needing further discussion. Schools implemented many of these solutions without prompting during the project. These included changes to the daily program to enable food provision earlier in the day, how children were dropped off at school by caregivers (to encourage them to feel more welcome) and improving parent-school communications. An unexpected aspect of the project was early requests from both parents and staff for psychoeducation on chosen topics, which all agreed to. Topics included school and home routines (e.g., ensuring children get enough sleep), messaging to parents, timing of the school day, accessing resources, encouraging reading, participation in home chores, and childcare during parents' absences.

The first six workshops were held fortnightly and were characterised by high levels of interest (average attendance figure of 88%). The summer holidays then led to an eight-week break, with the final two workshops held the following year (with lower average attendance of 44% due to children moving schools, changes in work obligations, newborn babies, and participants relocating). Individual closing interviews were conducted with 16 of the 17 participants after the final workshop. These were analysed and are presented below in identified themes to provide insights into the project's impact.

Deeper understanding of roles and relationships: The most consistently reported aspect, from both staff and parents, was their experience of the project as a growth and learning exercise, with one stating that "*I want the best possible school for my child*" (P15). They commented on developing a deeper understanding of factors impacting ECD and the roles of parents and teachers. Parents reported gaining confidence and becoming much more involved in their children's education; for example, one noted, "*Every day I now ask them what they did at school*" (P12). The following two comments illustrate improved communication and involvement in the groups: "*… we've never talked like this WITH one another: we had to consider others' opinions and ideas*" (P2); "*… even the shy ones participated*" (P11). The workshops thus seemed to have a positive impact on forging closer relationships and engagement between parents and staff, as well as between the two ECD centres.

Initiative and impact within the wider community: Participants reported sharing information with other parents in the community. For example, one parent invited her friend (also a parent with pre-school children) to attend the post-process interview "*to learn what we do*" (P17). Another said she had threatened some children in the community as follows: "*I'll get the police if you don't go to school!*" (P13), demonstrating a sense of greater awareness of the importance of school and assertiveness. Both centres initiated several projects of their own accord, including sharing resources, planning school meetings at the start of the term, and organising novel fundraising events.

The importance of ECD for children: Measurable impacts of the project included what seemed to be an increase in enrolment figures for both ECD centres (one practitioner reporting a third more registrations in the new year compared to the previous year). An educator noted: "*the word has spread - parents in the community are more aware of the importance of ECD*" (P8). Furthermore, practitioners from both schools reported their perceptions that the number of learners regularly attending school had more than doubled.

Adults' desires for further education and development: An unexpected outcome was that many of the participants expressed their desires to study further, with follow-up meetings confirming that a number had registered for courses. One reported: "*I want to learn more about ECD for my own child and for the community's children*" (P14). In addition, the community identified a need for remedial reading for older children, and seven community members were subsequently trained as volunteers to assist with children's after-school reading (a project that developed further three years later).

Study 2 emphasised how parents and teachers valued the researcher travelling far to attend to their situations. The session recordings were characterised by humour and compassion, deepening the relationships between group members. It also illustrated parents' and practitioners' willingness to implement changes for the children's benefit. Participants shared ideas and felt more positive about their roles and the possibilities for improvement.

Synthesis of Similarities in the Case Studies

In both studies, parents reported gaining a better understanding of their roles and influence in their children's lives and education. They were encouraged to set boundaries and provide responsive care, valuing engagement with children and using available (and recycled) materials as stimuli. The participants recognised that centres and parents shared cooperative responsibilities to nurture children and provide regular and predictable routines. This included awareness of more stressful times of the month for children (for example, when social grants are paid out, leading to alcohol consumption in the communities), to provide protection from exposure to other adults' antisocial behaviour.

Participants reported greater knowledge of the benefits children gain from early access to stimulating environments, story-reading, and educational opportunities (and educators noted increases in children's attendance and enrolment, possibly related to parents sharing information). This included practitioners and parents becoming mutually aware of their respective contributions and building greater trust, which improved formal and informal communication channels. In both case studies, facilitators enhanced communication by working in participants' first language. This was appreciated and seemed to encourage increased involvement, with messaging through WhatsApp also improving connectivity. Practitioners were encouraged to draw on families' funds of knowledge and problem-solving capacities, rather than feeling unconnected. This illustrated a valuing of the assets of both families and communities.

There were several examples of parents and practitioners feeling greater personal agency. This was evident in the initiatives that began without prompting and the realisation that they could take a more active role in communicating with the centres and other parents. In both studies, the relationships the researchers observed developing in their groups were characterised by empathy and emotional support.

The common elements described above provide evidence that partnership work can drive beneficial change. Participants' regular, sustained attendance over the six fortnightly sessions shows they valued the opportunity to learn and engage with each other and the facilitators. The interventions illustrate the value of building collaboratively on people's combined knowledge of their circumstances and what worked in local contexts.

Discussion

The two case studies described above employed qualitative interventionist methods within an action research framework to develop parent – educator partnerships and explore possibilities for changes in practice. This enabled the programs to

respond to participants' needs and remain flexible enough to accommodate the material they contributed to each session. The authors found, as in two other recent SA studies (Cilliers et al., 2026; Esterhuizen et al., 2023), that an action-based methodology suited their program design. Although both studies were modest in size (each including six to eight meetings and accommodating eight to seventeen participants), combining them as two case studies increases credibility and potential transferability by highlighting overlapping findings.

Our research question was: "How might an educational partnership approach with ECD parents and educators be developed and utilised to support the learning and development of pre-school children?" In the following paragraphs, we discuss features of our partnership approaches and their links to other research, the changes in perceptions among both parents and educators, and their growth in communication and assertiveness. We also discuss challenging and possible limiting elements of the facilitation that may have impacted open expression by participants. We comment on and make suggestions of possibilities for wider implementation of similar programs.

Previous models of engagement with parents often employed "top-down" structures (Okeke, 2014). These approaches were intimidating to some parents and may have excluded those who felt that their first language or cultural background did not "fit" with the more middle-class approaches of some ECD centres (e.g., Singh et al., 2004). When designing the programs reported above, avoiding this aspect was a key consideration, informed by Vygotskian ideas of using everyday language and encouraging all participants to express their opinions. In both case studies, participants used their first languages, and we aimed to promote relaxed settings that promoted inclusion and helped people feel comfortable sharing openly. We believe key factors were collaborative facilitation that encouraged engagement and responsiveness that included everyone, leading to strong attendance and positive contributions, thus mobilising social and cultural capital (Ebrahim, 2024). In addition, the reflexive design of the programs meant that facilitators were constantly sensitive to reducing their influence on discussions as much as possible and promoting participation.

The partnership concept underpinning each case study was based on demonstrating respect for parents in their roles as primary caregivers (Cooper et al., 2009). The distinct but complementary expertise that was recognised in the different stakeholders represented efforts to work towards forms of "horizontal dialogues" (Ebrahim, 2024). Both case studies' primary message encourages further development of partnerships between ECD practitioners and parents, given the efficacy of the modest group interventions described. For parents, their perceptions of practitioners as responsible for children's learning shifted toward seeing these as shared roles, similar to other South African studies in which parents initially felt ill-equipped to support learning at home (Okeke, 2014). Each project demonstrates the benefits of interaction among people in the ECD system, given the difficulties practitioners face when translating policy into practice in under-resourced settings. In both cases, evidence suggested a developing community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The common elements in the findings suggest the potential for beneficial change through partnership work, building collaboratively on people's combined knowledge of local contexts and circumstances (Connelly et al., 2024). Participants reported changed perspectives and gained insight into the value of parents' involvement, leading to greater learner attendance and potential learning. Practitioners gained a better understanding of learners' home environments and seemed more responsive to children's needs (as found in Cilliers et al., 2026).

There were numerous examples of adults (particularly parents, but also educators) becoming more assertive in articulating what they and their children needed and communicating more effectively (for example, parents working with

educators and educators networking across different centres). Participants became aware that they could be more actively involved in ECD centres and, more broadly, take action to address issues in their communities, moving from passivity in the face of challenges. Although the constraints of providing stimulating environments (as in Makunga et al., 2017) were recognised, ideas and examples were shared of ways that simple and recycled items could be used to promote play and how children could be better included in household activities and chores (as also evidenced in Cilliers et al., 2026).

From a facilitation perspective, we need to underline the intensive attention needed and the time-consuming nature of the work in both studies. Because each was part of separate PhD research, this was expected at the time; however, this element is likely to be a limitation in already stretched psychosocial services, and one author has experienced similar time constraints in a subsequent project. Once the programs are developed, with guidelines and a manual for facilitators employed in district offices, this limitation could be overcome so similar programs can be rolled out.

We acknowledge, however, that a limitation of this research is that the two co-authors conducted both the group facilitation and the follow-up interviews, and this may have influenced the mainly positive responses, given the relationships built. We also recognise that the groups were each facilitated by a trained and experienced professional (a social worker and a psychologist respectively), who were both very aware of the potential power dynamics invested in their roles and thus worked very actively to reduce the influence of these (through co-facilitator reflections and critique in case study 1, and promoting the use of humour and a relaxed style in case study 2). These aspects are important considerations since people in disadvantaged and under-served communities might be reluctant to appear at all critical (Smith & Stillman, 2014), both due to the politeness embedded in their respective collective cultural attitudes and because they have appreciated any support provided and do not wish to negatively influence any future potential project work. This illustrates how power dynamics, access to resources, and cultural norms may create significant barriers to open feedback (as in van der Riet & Boettiger, 2009). Another limitation is that we have no "objective" measures of positive changes in children's learning and development, which future research might incorporate.

Regarding the design of case study II, an aspect that hindered early discussion (and this became apparent during the first two sessions) was our attempt to explore contradictions, which is part of the expansive learning approach of Engeström (2001). It became clear that expecting participants with relatively limited education to engage in more scholarly language on these abstract ideas was unrealistic and created a barrier to the participation inherent to action research.

The consistently high attendance and largely positive feedback from participants in both case studies bode well for expanding such initiatives, especially in resource-constrained settings, where facilitators could be trained to run group-based meetings (over 6-8 sessions) within school districts. We could train, role-model, and pass on skills in group guidance, responsiveness, collaborative problem-solving, and participation to other workers in district-based psycho-educational roles, enabling them to reach more parents and practitioners at any one time. Thus, we would advocate for positive changes within the educational system to better meet learners' needs.

Both programs made it clear that caregivers in disadvantaged contexts need support and respond to assistance that provides information, resources, ideas, and links to further educational opportunities. Building on the case study findings, our recommendations are therefore to commend community-based involvement and support. Caregivers and local organisations could be engaged in creating more supportive networks around ECD, fostering partnerships that create more nurturing environments for children.

Conclusion

The case studies described above were not initially planned to have broader "reach" in terms of influence in their respective communities; however, participants appeared to have "ripple effects", reporting to other parents and friends about their experiences and the knowledge they shared and gained. This emphasises the importance of using community-based approaches and methodologies in such programs (as in Visser et al., 2022). The two projects explored potentially transformative interventions designed to raise consciousness in adults (as in Freire, 1970) within the ECD system, to enable them to recognise and share their knowledge of coping in challenging circumstances. The case studies focused upon methods to enhance young learners' cognitive, emotional, and social needs in the two local contexts. They highlight the importance of education systems building parent-practitioner collaboration by training facilitators to run similar groups (perhaps supported by a manual of ideas) to share knowledge about children's development and learning. When planning such work, facilitators need to find ways to maximally reach out to and involve parents and practitioners, through locating the work in parents' first languages, being sensitive to their time constraints, motivating them to be interested in the partnership work because of benefits to their children, with awareness of the need to build confidence in the respective stakeholders, as suggested by Okeke (2014).

These two case studies provide valuable examples of how action-based research, whether in the form of action research (Akhurst, 2022), PALAR as reported in Esterhuizen et al. (2023) and Cilliers et al. (2026), or other participatory frameworks, could drive positive change in ECD centres, to benefit early learning and improved opportunities. The richness of voices and perspectives shared in the groups helped participants bond beyond program boundaries, promoting collective responsibility and knowledge-sharing. The findings resonate with studies in similar SA contexts, such as Connelly et al. (2024), Esterhuizen et al. (2023), and Cilliers et al. (2026), illustrating the beginnings of knowledge accumulation in the area. Meeting ECD needs through responsive care and engagement in a learning culture has the potential to create more capable individuals. In turn, this can lead to stronger communities with adults who can take action, communicate better, and draw on resources and others' resourcefulness, leading to better ECD outcomes and broader benefits for the communities involved.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have had no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the writing up of this work.

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