

South Africa: Women play key role in early childhood learning and care, but they need help accessing university

March 7 2024, by Kaylianne Aploon-Zokufa



Credit: director muuh from Pexels

In South Africa, the [early childhood development sector](#) is [dominated by women](#) who build creches from the ground up. These women offer

services to communities that go far beyond childcare. They teach, feed and nurture children and keep them safe. They also build sustainable businesses and provide employment opportunities to members of their communities.

Previously managed under the Department of Social Development and currently under the Department of Basic Education, the early [childhood](#) development sector runs on an entrepreneurship model. Some individuals in the sector opt to set up and run childcare businesses; there are also many not-for-profit early childhood development centers. It's a model that lends itself to informal sector economic practices.

Like most [women](#) in the informal sector in developing countries, these early childhood development practitioners work long hours for very little money. This reality echoes the findings of [a World Bank report](#) which showed that women who trade in any part of the informal sector in African countries are prone to economic exploitation.

Most of the women who run these facilities have certificates and diplomas from vocational colleges. But they are unable to get accepted at universities so they cannot pursue degrees. This limits their earning ability and their ability to formalize their businesses.

Having taught in vocational colleges, I set out to better understand the obstacles faced by women early childhood development practitioners who wanted to further their studies by going to university. I [conducted research](#) for my doctoral studies on practitioners and their learning journeys, as well as a focus on what's known as recognition of prior learning.

This concept assumes that people learn through experience; it then provides access to qualifications based on that experience. In some cases, people can also gain university credits through recognition of prior

learning. This can then be used towards the completion of a higher education qualification.

I interviewed 11 women, aged between 33 and 46, based in Cape Town.

[My findings](#) suggest two potential changes to the existing system. One, there should be a standard policy across all South African universities related to recognition of prior learning as a criterion for entrance. And two, universities should accept women early childhood development practitioners who have successfully completed early childhood development qualifications at vocational colleges.

The benefits would be twofold. It would benefit the women, who could build better lives for themselves and their families. And it would benefit [society](#). [Research has shown](#) that early childhood development is critical to children's lives.

Women's own stories

All the women in my study held early childhood development qualifications from technical and vocational education and training colleges. These qualifications train women to work in centers with babies and children between the ages of 0 and 9. They completed their qualifications while working as teachers, principals and owners of early childhood development centers.

The women wanted to further their education by going to university and continue training as teachers and find better employment. They applied at different universities but were rejected, primarily because their matric results—the final secondary school exam—had not qualified them for university entrance and partly because of their ages.

In some cases they were unsuccessful because universities didn't

recognize their existing vocational college early childhood development qualifications.

The only route of access was therefore through recognition of prior learning. However, this program is not offered at all higher education institutions for access into the faculty of education.

Jenna (not her real name) found out from a friend about one university's recognition of prior learning program. The application process was arduous and costly—Jenna paid R2,750 (about US\$145) overall. She submitted her work history, certificates, a motivational letter, and letters of support from the principal of the early childhood development center where she worked and from a mentor. She also submitted lesson plans and a portfolio reflecting her teaching philosophy.

Her application was successful. However, at the close of my study, because of ineffective administration from the university's side, Jenna had not yet entered into the first year of her degree program.

The [South African Qualifications Authority](#) allows only 10% of entrants into any undergraduate and postgraduate university program via recognition of prior learning. Some of my participants also applied at a different university, located in the Western Cape, where Cape Town is, for this alternative route. They were advised that, even if they successfully completed the recognition of prior learning process, there was no guarantee they'd be accepted into their desired program, because of the 10% rule.

In my study, different institutions managed recognition of prior learning very differently, which caused a lot of confusion for my participants—and, by extension, the many people hoping to access it. Some institutions do not consider recognition of prior learning at all.

Answers

I argue for a number of steps to be taken.

Firstly, universities should provide access to early childhood development teachers who have successfully completed vocational qualifications. They can do this by recognizing these qualifications.

Secondly, universities should recognize prior learning and standardize recognition of prior learning processes in their access criteria.

Thirdly, they should make the process more affordable and easier to navigate.

This would help early childhood [development](#) teachers to keep learning, no matter their age. And that would be good for South Africa more broadly: when women learn, children and communities learn and grow as well.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: South Africa: Women play key role in early childhood learning and care, but they need help accessing university (2024, March 7) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-south-africa-women-play-key.html>

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