

Occupational Certificate: Early Childhood Development Practitioner Response by Wordworks to public consultation

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Wordworks was established in 2005 with the aim of strengthening early language and literacy learning among children from historically disadvantaged communities in South Africa. Our programmes are currently delivered in four South African provinces. Wordworks' particular knowledge and expertise lies in the areas of early language and literacy learning, including how young children learn, and good teaching practice. As part of our ongoing policy and advocacy work, we have looked extensively at the most recent research on what works in language and literacy teaching and learning in the years before school. Our comments below are focused on those parts of the draft policy that relate most closely to our experience and knowledge.

Wordworks has produced a number of publications that are relevant to this consultation and that are available at www.wordworks.org.za:

- *Narrowing the Literacy Gap: Strengthening language and literacy development between birth and six years* (Shelley O'Carroll and Rebecca Hickman, 2012)
- *Much more than counting: Supporting mathematics development between birth and five years* (Cally Kühne, Shelley O'Carroll, Brigid Comrie and Rebecca Hickman, 2013)
- *Policy briefings: Early language and literacy learning* (three briefings on the why, what and how of early language and literacy learning) (Rebecca Hickman and Shelley O'Carroll, 2013)
- Early literacy poster (a new resource providing parents and ECD practitioners with key information and practical ideas on how to support early language and literacy learning) (Rebecca Hickman, Shelley O'Carroll and Brigid Comrie, 2015)

General comment

Wordworks welcome the publication of the Occupational Qualification Document for Early Childhood Development Practitioner. We note in particular that the qualification document has improved on the occupational profile published last year and we welcome the fact that feedback appears to have been taken on board.

Our experience in the pre-school phase continually reinforces how important it is that ECD practitioners are equipped with the knowledge, understanding and skills to enable young children to reach their full potential. This is even more important for children from

disadvantaged backgrounds, where effective ECD practitioners can help to buffer the language and learning gap that is known to emerge during this period.

We would make one overarching observation on the qualification document and the curriculum document, which is that the importance of stable and nurturing relationships for children's development and learning is not sufficiently emphasised. It is well established that healthy attachments with adults are essential for proper brain development in the early years, promoting not only wellbeing and resilience, but also cognitive and language development (McCain et al 2007, Weiss et al 2006). We recommend that further consideration is given to how this vital element of early childhood care is properly integrated across the knowledge and practice modules.

Page 3 – Purpose

1. We note that building effective relationships with parents and caregivers is not mentioned among the five learner outcomes. Given what we know about the central importance of the home learning environment, this is a crucial area of competence and understanding for ECD practitioners (Sammons et al 2007, Sylva et al 2012, Halgunseth 2009, Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). We recommend therefore that it is foregrounded through inclusion in the learner outcomes. This could be done as a stand-alone outcome or by extending the fourth outcome as follows:
'Develop reports of children's development and learning, and build collaborative relationships with parents and caregivers in order to share knowledge about how to support learning in the home.'

Page 3 – Knowledge modules

2. We note that there is no knowledge module on how children learn. This is a large area of theory and practice. The curriculum content of three knowledge modules (Theories and Perspectives of Child Development, Planning and Programme Development in early childhood settings, Facilitation and mediation of active learning) touch on some aspects of how children learn, including through a welcome emphasis on play. However, nowhere does this seem to be covered as a specific topic and the qualification might be strengthened by the separate inclusion of this as a stand-alone area of understanding and competence. By bringing together key themes in this way, ECD Practitioners will be helped to make important links and, above all, to build a coherent theoretical framework that encompasses all their practice and approaches.

Such a knowledge module would potentially cover a number of areas including:

- the role of stable, nurturing relationships in early learning
- the continuous and contextual nature of early learning
- how children construct meaning (in particular the importance of enabling children to build their own understandings within personally meaningful contexts)
- the need for children to develop skills for learning, such as self-control, perseverance, concentration and flexible thinking

- the social dimension of early learning and the role of peer learning (particularly relevant in the African context, see Awopegba, Oduolowu and Nsamenang 2013 and Nsamenang 2010)
 - the wide range of learning styles and preferences of young children
 - the role of choice, autonomy and personal agency in early learning
 - why trial and error problem-solving is an important part of early learning
 - why play, games, music, movement and dance are particularly effective mediators of early learning
 - the role of language and interaction in early learning
 - the role of doing and imitating in early learning
 - the role of stories and books in young children's learning
3. *KM-02 Theories and Perspectives of Child Development:* In the curriculum document, this module does not appear to include different **cultural** perspectives on child development. It is well established that different theories of child development may reflect cultural preferences rather than empirical research (LeVine 2004, Pence and Marfo 2008, and Awopegba, Oduolowu and Nsamenang 2013). We would recommend that African perspectives on child development are a compulsory topic in this module.
 4. *KM-03 Planning and programme development in early childhood settings:* We welcome the inclusion of self-regulation as a topic element in the curriculum document, but note that it is not clearly covered under the 'internal assessment criteria and weight'. It is important that ECD practitioners are equipped with a thorough understanding of the role of self-regulation (executive function) in young children's learning and development. Self-regulation skills include concentration, persistence, mental flexibility, working memory and self-control. Simple strategies that ECD practitioners can use to promote self-regulation include ensuring an activity is the right level of difficulty, modelling a task, participating in a task alongside a child, giving positive feedback, and encouraging children to plan, reflect and consider other approaches. These important areas do not seem to be covered under this knowledge module nor under KM-04, which might be the more relevant place to situate them.
 5. *KM-04 Facilitation and mediation of active learning:* We welcome the explicit inclusion of language in the curriculum document. It might be helpful to clarify where language is being included as a practitioner method (in terms of communication and talk) and where it is being included as a child outcome (in terms of expressive and receptive language skills), as this is not always clear (e.g. IAC0103).
 6. *KM-04 Facilitation and mediation of active learning:* In the curriculum content for this module, there is currently an absence of a clear and specific emphasis on the role of talk and interaction in language development. We would recommend that this is the first strategy listed in IAC0104 and perhaps also focused on separately.

Studies show that the quantity and quality of talk between adults and infants is key to early language development and learning (Hart and Risley 1999, NIEER 2006, Rosenkoetter and Barton 2002, Dickinson and Tabors 2001). It also contributes to a close, responsive bond between caregiver and child. Talk offers an organising principle for how play, storytelling

and doing, among other activities, can all foster and extend language. Giving babies and toddlers words and naming things that interest them, commenting on what children are doing, extending children's language by adding to what they say, explaining meanings of new words, asking and answering questions, and giving explanations, are all aspects of 'talk' that are critical to early language and literacy development.

7. *KM-04 Facilitation and mediation of active learning:* We welcome the clear reference to early literacy in the topic elements in the curriculum document. However, under the 'internal assessment criteria and weight' no further mention of early literacy is made, beyond the references to language development. It is essential that ECD practitioners have a strong theoretical and practical understanding of what early literacy is and how they can support and assess it.

Early literacy encompasses a number of different strands including vocabulary and comprehension, narrative skills, enjoyment of books and print, print awareness, drawing and emergent writing, awareness of sounds in words, and letter knowledge. Behaviours of young children such as telling stories, pretend reading, noticing letters in environmental print, playing games with sounds in words, drawing, scribbling and using pretend writing for a purpose, are all early literacy skills and part of an ongoing process of learning to read and write that starts at birth.

8. *KM-04 Facilitation and mediation of active learning:* The curriculum content for this module would be strengthened by the explicit inclusion of certain pedagogic techniques, in particular **scaffolding** which is understood to be a key component of effective teaching and learning in the early years (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2002). Modelling and guided participation are two forms of scaffolding that support young children to learn new skills. Scaffolding can also involve using questions, comments and prompts across a wide range of activities to extend and amplify a child's understanding within their current range of competence (Bowman et al 2000, Bodrova and Leong 2007, Kritt 2013). It requires not only that the ECD practitioner facilitates the activity, but also that they are highly involved.

Page 4 – Practical skills modules

9. *PM-01 Plan and prepare inclusive educational activities and routines using an approved programme based on the curriculum framework:* We have concerns about how realistic it is to expect ECD practitioners to be able to work with the 0-4 National Curriculum Framework (NCF), which in its current form, is not an accessible or useful document for practitioners.

A major challenge in the current delivery of early learning programmes is the huge conceptual and implementation gaps between high-level documents, such as the 0-4 NCF, and on the ground resources and realities. An urgent task in this respect is to translate the high-level documents into simple, user-friendly guidelines and programmes accessible to ECD practitioners of all skill levels. These should be non-prescriptive and capable of local adaptation.

10. *PM-01 Plan and prepare inclusive educational activities and routines using an approved programme based on the curriculum framework:* The inclusion of applied knowledge area AK0101 'Child development ages and stages' in the curriculum document, could imply an acceptance of the developmentalist view of early childhood development. (See also other uses of 'Child development ages and stages' knowledge area on p28, p29 and p32.) 'Developmentally appropriate practice' may be a less controversial phrase, and reflect a wider understanding of the different personalities, preferences and needs of children who may ostensibly be at the same age or stage. PM-03-PS02 ('Record and report on each child's progress according to the age and stage') may be problematic for the same reason.
11. *PM-02-PS02 Mediate active learning in an integrated and holistic learning programme:* Again there is no mention in the curriculum document of the core skill of scaffolding, one of the most important techniques for supporting early learning which should be used across learning activities. This is a key omission. (See point 8 above.)
12. *PM-05 Build and maintain collaborative relationships with parents and other service providers:* We welcome the inclusion of this module and the respectful and inclusive language used in the curriculum document.

Page 4 – Work experience modules

13. *WM-02-WE01 Facilitate and mediate all aspects of the daily programme, including routines, under supervision, for a period of 2 months:* There again appears to be no expectation in the curriculum document that ECD practitioners should be able to demonstrate the ability to scaffold children's learning across activities. (See point 8 above.)

Page 4 – Entry requirements

14. While NQF Level 3 is given as the entry requirement, it is not clear whether it is anticipated that this refers to fundamentals and what foundational learning is compulsory. It would be helpful if this could be clarified. If foundational learning is not to be specified it may be necessary to have a competence test in addition to the entry requirements.
15. There are many caregivers in South Africa who have limited formal training and qualifications but extensive experience of providing care to young children in formal and informal ECD settings. It is important that ways are found to harness their skills and experience. We would recommend therefore that clear pathways from a variety of starting-points to the proposed entry requirement are articulated in this qualification document, with examples given.

Pages 4-5 – Exit level outcomes and associated assessment criteria

16. *Exit Level Outcome 2 AC 2:* We recommend that this reads:
'Types of play **and other activities** that support the areas of learning and development are identified and analysed as outlined in the early childhood development curriculum.'

17. *Exit Level Outcome 2 AC7*: We recommend that this reads:

‘The development of children's language, thinking **and self-regulation** is mediated through integrated activities using different methods, **including talk and scaffolding.**’

18. *Exit Level Outcome 4 AC 5*: Because of the omission of parental partnerships/collaboration from the five outcomes (see point 1 above), communication with parents is only mentioned in the assessment criteria insofar as it relates to behavioural issues. This is clearly inadequate and we recommend that an additional assessment criteria is added along the lines of:

‘Different strategies for communicating with parents and caregivers and involving them in their children’s learning are identified and explained.’