

Strategies Utilised by Practitioners to Enhance the Active Participation of Parents in Mobile ECCE Services

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Abstract

Parent participation in early childhood care and education (ECCE) is crucial for children's growth and development. It is more important within the context of mobile ECCE services because it targets a population of children living in remote or underprivileged communities. Research shows that parent participation positively impacts children's learning outcomes. However, engaging parents actively in their children's education can be challenging for mobile ECCE practitioners. This study aimed to investigate the strategies utilised by practitioners to enhance parents' active participation in mobile ECCE services. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was supported by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to inform the study, capturing the experiences and perspectives of 20 selected ECCE practitioners from two mobile ECCE facilities. Data analysis was facilitated by using ATLAS.ti software, which led to the emergence of seven themes. The findings shed light on the array of strategies practitioners employ to enhance parent participation in mobile ECCE services. Despite the challenges, practitioners demonstrated resourcefulness and creativity in promoting meaningful partnerships with parents. Several recommendations emanating from the findings were suggested. The study's contribution to knowledge is grounded in promoting collaborative relationships between ECCE practitioners and parents to optimise children's learning and development outcomes.

Keywords: *Early childhood care and education, parent engagement, practitioner, strategies, mobile services.*

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Introduction

Parent participation in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) mobile units is recognised as a critical component for the enhancement of children's development and learning (Oke et al., 2021; Ramotuana & Amone-P'Olak, 2020). The participation typically involves parents enacting more direct, hands-on-related roles in various aspects of their children's education, as well as actively participating in school community events (Kesebonye & Amone-P'Olak 2021; Okeke, 2018; Ramotuana & Amone-P'Olak, 2020). Research consistently confirms that active parental participation in ECCE not only enhances children's academic performance, but also promotes their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Epstein, 2018). Despite its significance, engaging parents in ECCE activities remains a challenge, particularly in mobile ECCE spaces which are vulnerable to logistical and contextual barriers. This paper explored the strategies practitioners employ to enhance parent participation in mobile ECCE services in order to enhance cooperation between parents and educators with the aim of supporting children's holistic development to achieve improved educational outcomes.

Ugwuanyi et al. (2023, p.142) observe that in the South African context, mobile units designated as early childhood development units have been in operation for several years to provide early learning services to a growing population of children. These facilities aim to provide early learning to a diverse population of children through ECCE programmes which focus on language development, cognitive, and social-emotional skills (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Mobile ECCE facilities offer educational outreach services directly to children in underserved or remote areas, mostly through the play-based learning approach (Ndlovu et al., 2023). These mobile units are designed to be easily transported, flexible, and accessible to reach children in virtually inaccessible areas. Ndlovu et al. (2023) consider mobile ECCE units as being indispensable in promoting ECCE in that they are stationed at different locations to service a wider range of children and families.

Since the purpose of this paper was to explore the strategies utilised by practitioners to enhance the active participation of parents in mobile ECCE settings, the research was based on how practitioners perceive active parent participation in terms of the various types of engagement, constraints, and workable strategies of enhancement. Specifically, the

objectives of the study in terms of mobile ECCE settings were to explore: i) practitioners' perceptions of active parental participation; ii) various types of parental participation; iii) reasons for the importance of parental participation; iv) constraints to active parental participation; and v) interventions to enhance active parental participation.

What mobile ECCE units entail

In the South African context, mobile early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to a programme utilising a large vehicle, usually a container truck or a large van. The vehicle carries teaching and learning materials and proceeds to any available open space or field within the targeted community. Other items in the vehicle would necessarily include gazebos or tents, and various types of play materials. Each vehicle provides seating for 5 to 8 practitioners, a storage corner for food items and serving plates, water for various uses, and a children's mobile toilet with toiletries. The truck usually carries plastic reading desks, chairs and carpets. There are also children's stories and other books stored in a corner of the mobile truck. While the number of children attending the mobile sites ranges from 35 to 40, parents are responsible for ensuring that their children attend learning activities.



Figure 1. Mobile ECCE site showing a tent (gazebo), vehicle, plastic chairs and children



Figure 2. A practitioner setting up the learning space in an open field



Figure 3. A truck, children's learning and play sessions, and porridge in plates

The remit of the mobile ECCE unit is to provide accessible early learning opportunities for children in underserved areas. Mobile units are strategic in the early education of vulnerable children, namely those from the hard-to-reach deep rural communities; the population of the poorest of the poor; undocumented migrant African families; those orphaned by the untimely death of parents, and abandoned children from unplanned pregnancies (Selepe et al., 2024). The practitioners (sometimes referred to as facilitators) usually visit a community space (the site) to meet with children who are brought to the unit by their parents or guardians. The practitioners will spend between three and four hours at each site and will visit each site three times a week. During each visit, the practitioners set up a classroom environment with the tents and carpet to provide a learner-friendly floor for the plastic desks and chairs. The practitioners work with an approved timetable and curriculum. Because parents and guardians bring their children to the mobile unit, each day begins with a parents' meeting, providing them with the opportunity to inform practitioners of any important information about their children. The four-hour daily activities cater for: i) early teaching and learning activities; ii) short break; iii) snack time; iv) purposeful play time; v) midday break; vi) lunch time; final teaching and learning activities; and closure and packing up. Overall, mobile ECCE services play essential roles in the cognitive, physical, socioeconomic, communicative, and adaptive development of children under the age of five, who, without such interventions, would likely have been overlooked. No wonder the mobile ECCE programme is steadily gaining momentum as a significant provider of early learning for children aged zero to four in South Africa.

Literature Review

The literature review of this study is based on three sections. These sections include: i) challenges for parents to participate in their children's education; ii) strategies to enhance parental participation; and iii) the empirical evidence and theoretical framework guiding the study.

Challenges for parents to participate in their children's education

Lamentably, parent participation in children's education has been stumped by several common challenges for parents and educators alike that hinder family-school partnerships (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Kirmaci, 2019; Wildmon et al., 2024). Time constraints and inadequate relevant resources are often cited as significant obstacles to parent participation (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). For example, parents may struggle to find the time to actively participate in their children's education due to, among others, work and family obligations. Educators also face challenges related to time constraints and the lack of training and skills for effectively collaborating with parents (Sim et al., 2021). Moreover, Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) and Wildmon et al. (2024) explain parents' low self-efficacy or lack of confidence as a reason for their non-involvement in school-related activities; hence, they feel uncomfortable engaging with practitioners. Additionally, Sim et al. (2021) contend that fear of retaliation, language barriers, and cultural differences may further complicate parent-educator liaisons, thus making it challenging to establish effective workable partnerships. Furthermore, differences in values, beliefs, and expectations between parents and practitioners can create tensions that hinder the development of mutual trust and understanding (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Wildmon et al. (2024) maintain that parents' negative experiences in schools and their level of education may also contribute to feelings of inadequacy in supporting their children academically.

Strategies to enhance parental participation: Some empirical evidence

Various strategies to enhance parent participation in their children's education emanate from Epstein's typology (2018) of parent participation. This typology comprises six types that may serve as a foundational framework for understanding and implementing strategies to promote parent participation in ECCE mobile facilities. These types include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with communities (Epstein, 2018; Grace, 2022). For instance, a teacher who prioritises regular communication with parents is likely to inspire parents to engage in conversations with their children about their experiences at school. Other scholars mention strategies such as

arranging parents' evenings, encouraging parents' participation in curriculum matters, raising awareness of school childcare policy for mothers, conducting home visits, organising school speech and debate functions, parent-teacher games and sports days that practitioners can use to encourage the active participation of parents in school events (Cheng & Chen 2018; Ugwuanyi et al., 2021). Also, school leaders empower parents to actively engage in their children's learning process when they provide families with information to support academic learning at home such as homework and curriculum-related activities (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017). Consulting with communities and including parents in decision-making are motivators that help them to feel empowered and valued (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Ultimately, creating a buy-in process to encourage parental participation in the activities of the school assists in accelerating children's development and learning.

Theoretical framework of this study

Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems (2000), which defines child development as a function that involves interaction between a person and the environment in which they live, informs this study. Everything pertaining to a child and her environment affects how they grow and develop. According to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, learners' behaviour is strongly influenced by elements in their social environments (Tudge et al., 2022). Thus, this theory affirms that an individual's development is influenced by the environment, which is divided into the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). This increases the need for parents to be encouraged to actively participate in their children's education to develop their confidence to interact cordially and appropriately with practitioners, while enhancing the quality of parent-child interactions (Tudge et al., 2022). Accordingly, this theory's relevance lies in its capacity to inform how child development is influenced by the participation and collaboration of parents and caregivers in creating a supportive and conducive ECCE environment. Various authors have applied the principles of Bronfenbrenner's research in their studies focusing on how different levels of ecological systems are interconnected to influence child development. The consensus is that parent participation is critical to enhancing children's academic outcomes (Elliott et al., 2020; Tudge et al., 2022; Sadownik & Višnjić Jevtić, 2023). This demonstrates the importance of parent

participation in child development.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies that ECCE practitioners use to enhance parents' active participation in mobile ECCE units (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2002) provided the theoretical lens for examining how environmental systems and contextual factors shape practitioners' experiences, perspectives, and strategies for promoting parental participation within mobile ECCE settings. The research team comprised lecturers in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) who received funding from the Hosken Consolidated Investments Foundation to investigate the contextual needs of ECCE provision in rural communities in the Free State, South Africa. The researchers were therefore positioned as academic researchers with prior knowledge of, and professional interest in, ECCE within these communities. They recognised that their prior experiences, professional roles, and assumptions could potentially influence the framing of interview questions, interactions with participants, and interpretation of the data. In particular, their professional commitment to strengthening ECCE provision and promoting parental involvement could have predisposed them to view parental participation as inherently beneficial and to focus primarily on strategies for enhancing it.

To address these potential influences, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researchers remained conscious of their positionality and deliberately sought to distinguish participants' accounts from their own prior knowledge and assumptions about mobile ECCE provision. During data collection, semi-structured interviews enabled practitioners to describe their experiences and strategies in their own terms, while probing questions were used to clarify meanings rather than impose predetermined interpretations. Throughout the data analysis process, the researchers continuously reflected on how their professional backgrounds, previous engagement with rural ECCE contexts, and assumptions about parental participation might shape their interpretation of participants' accounts. These reflexive considerations enhanced the transparency of the research process and helped ensure

that the findings remained grounded in the experiences and perspectives of the participating ECCE practitioners.

Participants

Twenty (20) practitioners working at two mobile ECCE sites in the Free State province of South Africa participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were suitable for providing the researchers with dependable, credible data relevant to the study's objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participants had the required experience to respond to the questions that guided the interviews. Of the 20 participants, 17 were female and only 3 were male. The researchers were not surprised by the skewed gender representation. Numerous studies (Mahadew & Hlalele, 2022; Osinaike & Gyan, 2023; Mofokeng, 2025) have highlighted reasons why the ECCE sector appears to be dominated by females. Participants had between 1 and 27 years of experience in ECCE services, and their qualifications ranged from National Curriculum Framework level 4 (Grade 12 or National Senior Certificate) to level 5 (National Higher Certificate) in Early Childhood Development (ECD) training.

Instruments

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 20 ECCE practitioners who participated in the study. We used an interview guide structured to align with the study's specific objectives. The guide had nine (9) sections that ensured that we remained focused while probing the participants. Section 1 sought participants' demographic information; section 2 explored participants' views on the issues of support for empowered, creative, passionate, and qualified practitioners servicing the mobile units; section 3 focused on the mobile learning environments; section 4 focused on the understanding of the practitioners concerning transformative, high-quality play-based early learning; section 5 explored whether the practices of the mobile sites were aligned with the government regulations; section 6 explored whether the mobile sites received adequate support in the areas of health and nutrition.

Section 7 of the interview guide, on which this paper is based, provided the opportunity to examine parental involvement in the activities of the mobile sites. Specifically, we engaged participants in learning about parental roles and their impact on both the mobile unit's activities and learners' holistic development. We probed a) how often parents' meetings took place and what roles parents play in the mobile unit's and learners' well-being; b) the challenges and opportunities for parents' and guardians' involvement in the mobile units; c) how often parents are involved in the education of their children; d) whether parents attend events organised at the mobile sites; e) whether parents volunteered to support the practitioners; f) if parents participate in decision making at the mobile units; g) whether parents were involved in educating their children at home; h) whether the practitioners promote parental involvement in children's early learning at the mobile sites; i) the influences of parental involvement in early learning; and j) we explored effective ways to equip parents' skills and knowledge development to enhance their involvement in their children's early learning.

Section 8 of the interview guide probed whether effective monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems were in place, including tracking children through formal schooling to determine whether learning at the mobile units was impactful. In the final section (9) of the interview guide we allowed participants to reflect on the interviews and raise questions for clarification. The use of open-ended questions during the semi-structured interviews was in line with the research questions, aim, and the objectives of the study. The interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) to accurately capture participants' information, after which transcriptions, analysis, interpretation, and reporting were conducted.

Procedure

Data were collected from 20 selected ECCE practitioners from two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that provided mobile ECCE services in the Free State province of South Africa. The interviews were conducted in participants' natural settings to foster freedom of expression and allow them to share their experiences of parental participation in the mobile ECCE environment. Once the researchers had met all ethical requirements, we engaged with the gatekeepers of the two NGOs that provided mobile ECCE services to

discuss access to the mobile sites. We arrived early at the NGO offices and followed their vehicles to the communities they served. Both the managers and the practitioners signed the consent forms to set the stage for the actual interviews. It was important for the researchers to ensure the one-on-one interviews took place at a time most convenient for the practitioners, to avoid interfering with their daily routines. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes, and the researchers conducted 20 interviews in all, over a period of eight weeks.

Ahmed (2024) notes that the extent to which findings accurately reflect participants' experiences is an essential attribute of qualitative data trustworthiness. We achieved this by adhering to and demonstrating the four elements of data trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

We built credibility by connecting with practitioners through interviews over an extended period. Selecting 20 of these practitioners ensured interview data that guaranteed internal consistency and allowed triangulating emerging views. In addition, extended engagement with multiple practitioners through interactions allowed us to obtain tick descriptions of participants' views (Ahmed, 2024). Moreover, debriefing enabled the researchers to send the final reports to the practitioners who were given the opportunity to review and reflect on the outcomes, thereby enhancing credibility. Also, data credibility was achieved via peer debriefing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the extent to which a study can be replicated in a different context with corresponding phenomenological similarities leading to similar outcomes. Transferability was assured by obtaining rich data on parent involvement at the two mobile ECCE sites, as well as by drawing on participants' demographic details and the methods and procedures used to collect data (Stahl & King, 2020). Then, we ensured we were as detailed as possible by providing comprehensive explanations of the research process and procedures, to allow readers, as well as those using the study's findings, to assess the relevance of the findings to similar circumstances, thus enhancing the study's transferability.

According to Ahmed (2024), dependability concerns the stability of research findings over time. To ensure dependability, we documented our approaches, data collection procedures, and analysis. We documented the decisions made throughout the research process, allowing future researchers to replicate the study, thereby guaranteeing the dependability of our

findings. In addition, we demonstrated dependability by establishing authentic, unbiased findings despite changes in the research setting or from participants during data collection (Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio & Kahlke, 2022). Stahl and King (2020) discuss data dependability as issues related to the repeatability of a study across similar contexts, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving similar conclusions. To achieve dependability, the researchers employed expert colleagues and peers to read, inspect, and to write comments on the final reports.

Lastly, trustworthiness was enhanced by ensuring data confirmability, which refers to the extent to which the findings of qualitative research are purely informed by participants' views, free of manipulation, subjectivity, and the personal prejudices of the researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Again, Ahmed (2024) confirms that confirmability refers to the neutrality of the findings, which remain unaffected by the researchers' subjective biases. We utilised peer member checking, debriefing, and reflexive notes to enhance the confirmability of the study's findings. Confirmability was also strengthened by providing comprehensive methodological descriptions that demonstrated how conclusions were reached and reported in this paper.

Ethical issues

The ethical approval certificate was issued by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the University of the Free State (certificate number UFS-HSD2022/0808/22). After this approval, we obtained gatekeepers' permission to access mobile ECCE facilities and to interact with practitioners. Thereafter, different interview sessions were conducted with participants at their various mobile sites.

Data analysis

Data were obtained using a semi-structured interview guide, which was subjected to thorough scrutiny by two qualitative specialists to strengthen triangulation, among other measures. Data analysis was facilitated by using Atlas.ti® software at two levels: the method level and the process level. At the method level, this study utilised the generic qualitative

data analysis method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, the coding method undertaken for data analysis was developed inductively from the raw data collected from 20 ECCE practitioners. At the process level, the 20 qualitative interview transcripts were analysed via Atlas.ti ®. The Atlas.ti ® Excel software revealed 38 codes assigned to segments of texts across all 20 interviews, which pointed to the dominant ideas in the dataset. Ultimately, seven main themes emerged: 1) Using the governing body as a strategy for participation; 2) Parents' meetings; 3) Home visits; 4) Parents' education through workshops; 5) The use of family motivators; 6) Involvement of parents in the mobile unit activities; and 7) Listening to parents to make them feel valued. These themes, which are presented in the section on findings and interpretation, are supported by verbatim excerpts from the information elicited from practitioners.

Findings

Drawing on participants' perceptions and experiences, a distinct array of strategies to enhance parents' active participation in mobile ECCE services was identified. The following section presents how these strategies unfold in practitioners' narratives, followed by a discussion of findings that are congruent with existing research. The strategies applied by ECCE practitioners to enhance parent participation were contextually similar, with only slight variations. They are presented below:

Theme 1: The governing body as a strategy

Several practitioners shed light on the governing body's integral role in fostering parent participation in a mobile ECCE unit. The governing body, comprising parents and community members, acts as an intermediary between ECCE practitioners and parents, ensuring collaboration in decision-making processes linked to daily operations. This partnership enables transparency and continuous communication about activities and events at the mobile site. Working closely with the governing body ensures that parents are kept informed and involved in both daily activities and broader administrative decisions.

Practitioner 15 articulated the following:

We have a governing body that we work hand-in-hand with, including parents, and thus

we inform them about everyday events at the sites.

This view was reinforced by **Practitioner 7**, who emphasised the role of the governing body in strengthening communication and responsiveness within mobile ECCE contexts:

Our governing body includes parents from the community, so they help us relay information and also bring parents' concerns back to us. This makes it easier for everyone to feel involved in what is happening at the mobile site.

Similarly, **Practitioner 20** highlighted the participatory nature of governing body structures, noting their contribution to shared decision-making and parental commitment:

Through the governing body meetings, parents are not just informed but also part of the decisions we make about the children's activities and daily programmes. This makes them more committed and active in supporting the ECCE units.

The above evidence suggests that collaboration with governing bodies as a strategy for managing mobile ECCE services can significantly enhance parent participation. This strategy aligns with existing research which asserts that governance structures that include parent representation can lead to improved educational outcomes and stronger family–school partnerships (Epstein, 2018; Grace, 2022). Moreover, it supports the view that parents are more likely to engage meaningfully in their children's education when they are assigned active roles within ECCE governance structures (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Thus, the involvement of governing bodies in the management and operational aspects of ECCE services emerges as a key mechanism for strengthening parent participation in mobile ECCE contexts.

Theme 2: Parents' meetings

This theme, drawn from practitioners' information, reveals a varied, yet consistent approach to engaging parents in the educational process. The excerpts below reflect several key practices and perspectives:

Practitioner 3: *We do have a parents' meeting at least once a quarter.*

Practitioner 10: *We have meetings quarterly, but some are held when there is an emergency when we want to address the parents.*

The practice of holding quarterly meetings, as mentioned above, provides a structured framework for sustainable parent engagement. This regularity helps parents anticipate and plan for meetings, thus fostering a stable and consistent line of communication. Regular

meetings also contribute to building trust and a sense of reliability between parents and educators, which is a positive element for effective collaboration (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017).

Practitioner 8: *We have our first meetings which obviously would be at the beginning of the year to introduce practitioners and other staff members, as well as to explain how we do things according to a year plan.*

The above evidence on beginning-of-the-year meetings for introductions and planning underscores the importance of setting clear expectations and establishing a collaborative relationship from the start. This initial engagement helps parents feel included and informed, which lays a strong foundation for future interactions and involvement.

The diverse strategies for parent meetings employed by ECCE practitioners highlight the importance of flexibility, regularity, and responsiveness in fostering effective parent participation. Regular meetings supplemented by workshops, urgent issue-based meetings, and daily interactions create a robust framework for continuous and meaningful parent participation. This multifaceted approach aligns with existing research, suggesting that varied and adaptable communication strategies are essential for effective parent participation in ECCE settings (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017; Grace, 2022). By implementing these strategies, ECCE practitioners can enhance parent engagement which results in achieving better educational outcomes for children.

Theme 3: Home visits

Home visits emerged as a significant strategy utilised by practitioners to engage parents who might otherwise be less involved in their children's education. The practitioners' narratives revealed diverse approaches and purposes for conducting home visits which reflect their efforts to circumvent obstacles that impede parent participation. **Practitioner 1** expressed the following:

My solution is to go to their homes, especially those who don't attend meetings, and those who don't help children with their homework. I go to them to try and encourage them; sometimes, I give homework, then go to them and ask what it is that the child is struggling with. Sometimes they will come to the site, but sometimes they won't come.

The above approach involving home visits focuses on encouraging parent participation in their children's homework which may include addressing specific academic challenges. This personalised engagement strategy serves as an intervention for parents who are less likely to

attend meetings or assist with schoolwork. By directly interacting with these parents in their homes, the practitioner can build rapport, understand their specific barriers, and provide tailored support (Cheng & Chen, 2018). This method highlights the importance of meeting parents in their setting to offer individualised encouragement and resources to enhance participation. **Practitioner 3** added:

We involve parents by holding workshops even during home visits to encourage them about healthy living and healthy lifestyles, and how children need to develop their brains through eating nutritiously.

This narrative extends the scope of home visits beyond academic support to include workshops on healthy living and lifestyle choices. By integrating health education into home visits, this practitioner addresses the holistic development of children, thus emphasising the correlation between nutrition, lifestyle, and cognitive development. This approach aligns with the understanding that parent participation in education can be fostered by addressing broader family wellbeing issues, thus fostering a more supportive home environment for learning. **Practitioner 4** indicated:

If parents don't come to the playgroups, we have home visits where we have one-on-one sessions so that we can listen to their problems.

The above elaboration describes using home visits for one-on-one sessions with parents who do not attend playgroups. These visits are designed to understand and address specific problems parents might be facing. This approach ensures that parents who are unable or unwilling to participate in group activities still receive individual attention and support. It reflects a commitment to inclusive engagement, ensuring that all parents could voice their concerns and receive guidance, thereby promoting a more equitable approach to parent participation.

The findings on home visits as a strategy for enhancing parent engagement in ECCE settings demonstrate the effectiveness of personalised, flexible, and holistic approaches. Practitioners utilise home visits not only to address academic concerns, but also to promote healthy lifestyles, solve individual problems, and maintain regular contact with families. These strategies help bridge the gap between the school and the home, thus creating a supportive network that encourages active parent participation (Epstein, 2018; Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017).

Theme 4: Parents' engagement through workshops

The practitioners' narratives revealed a consistent emphasis on conducting workshops and meetings as strategies to attract the engagement of parents in ECCE services. These strategies were designed to enhance parents' understanding of the importance of their ECCE involvement, build relationships, and equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to support their children's education. The following extracts testify to this strategy:

Practitioner 1: *We hold meetings and workshops occasionally for us to build relationships with them.*

Practitioner 4: *Mostly, we used to have workshops every month, and from there, parents' meetings were held whenever there was an issue that needed to be addressed urgently. That may be either once a month or once a quarter, and it will only depend on how urgently we need them.*

Practitioner 11: *We include the parents. We meet with parents when we have a problem with a child, and when we want the parents to know something, we invite them to the site for a meeting to tell them about the child or anything that concerns ECCE.*

Practitioner 17: *We promote parent participation by inviting them for a meeting every month to discuss things that concern their children's welfare. We also encourage them to help teach their children at home.*

Practitioner 16: *I think now we, as Unit X, have done the workshops for the parents to making them aware of how important it is to bring the children to the mobile ECD sites.*

By meeting with parents to discuss problems, practitioners can collaboratively find solutions to provide support at ECCE sites. This method ensures that parents are kept informed and involved in addressing pertinent issues. This fosters a cooperative relationship aimed at the child's wellbeing (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Practitioners understood the role of meetings and workshops as the process of building relationships with parents. By creating opportunities for face-to-face interactions, these sessions fostered trust and collaboration between practitioners and parents. The finding is like Baxter and Kilderry's study (2022) which suggested that building strong relationships is crucial for effective parent engagement as it creates a basis for mutual respect, harmony, openness, and transparency. Practitioner 16 also explained the role of workshops in raising awareness among parents about the importance of ECCE. This approach aligns with previous research indicating that informed

parents are more likely to participate actively in their children's education, which results in quality developmental outcomes (Epstein, 2018).

Theme 5: The use of family motivators

The Family Childcare Motivators (FCM) strategy involves personalised home visits where educators provide educational materials to interact with both children and their parents in a familiar environment to foster better collaborative educational efforts (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). In this regard, the following was enunciated:

Practitioner 3: *We've got FCM. The FCM is a family motivator. As a motivator I will start with that FCM whereby you take your bag, your resources, your toys, and everything, and you go to learners' homes. Then, you will stimulate the children, and also you will work with the parents.*

Practitioner 3's strategy of utilising the FCM approach illustrates being proactive and personal to enhance early childhood education through direct engagement with families. This strategy not only provides children with valuable stimulation in their home environment but also empowers parents by involving them in the educational process while building their capacity to support their child's development. The FCM approach aligns with best practice in early childhood education because it emphasises the importance of personalised, contextually relevant, and relationship-based interventions to foster effective parent engagement (Epstein, 2018; Baxter & Kilderry, 2022).

Theme 6: Involvement of parents in the mobile ECCE activities

The practitioners' responses revealed several strategies employed to include parents in the ECCE sector. The approaches ranged from involving parents in homework assignments to regular meetings to address children's welfare, including direct encouragement for home teaching and daily social interactions. The following response by **Practitioner 10** refers to homework as a tool for parent participation:

I think assigning children homework can help in that regard. Even though children are not expected to write, we can just write on a piece of paper for children to give to their parents. The message could include asking a parent to recite a folktale to a child so that the child will come and re-tell that story to the practitioner. In that way, we are involving and encouraging them.

The above evidence emphasises the use of homework assignments, not only as traditional academic tasks, but to foster parent-child interaction and engagement to achieve better

educational outcomes. By inspiring parents to narrate a folktale to the child at home, practitioners create opportunities for parents to actively participate in their children's education, while reinforcing cultural knowledge. This exemplifies how home-based learning activities can be designed to be both educational and engaging (Epstein, 2018).

Theme 7: Listening to parents and making them feel valued

The views expressed by practitioners enlighten us on the importance of consistent communication and active listening to foster a collaborative environment between ECCE practitioners and parents. These practitioners value parents' inputs that lead to enhancing children's holistic development. The following responses substantiate this:

Practitioner 7: *We allow them to get their point of view across on how we teach their children, and how we can both develop that child.*

Practitioner 11: *Every time they come to deliver the child, we speak to them. We ask: why did you not come to the meeting yesterday? It is important for the child. We do explain to them every day because we know that it is important for them to come to the site to see the child's work or to know what is going on with the child on the premises.*

By actively seeking parents' opinions on educational practices, practitioners demonstrated that they value parents' input. This approach not only creates opportunities for parents to be heard and valued, but it also presents beneficial insights that can enhance teaching strategies and child development plans (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Speaking with parents on a daily basis helps practitioners to maintain constant communication, ensuring that parents are continually informed about their children's activities and progress (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). This regular interaction helps build a solid relationship between ECCE unit staff and the parents (Epstein, 2018). For example, when practitioners ask parents why they missed meetings, it emphasises the importance of parent participation. This communication holds parents accountable while encouraging them to participate actively in their child's education, suggesting that their presence and input are valued and necessary.

Discussion

The findings of the present study support previous research on the importance of governing

bodies in enhancing parental involvement in ECCE settings. Kofi (2020) argues that governing structures promote transparency, communication, and collaboration between ECCE practitioners and parents. Similarly, participants in this study acknowledged the role of governing bodies in encouraging parent participation and supporting children's education. As such, the current study extends existing literature by demonstrating how governing bodies operate within mobile ECCE spaces. Practitioner participants highlighted that governing bodies serve as intermediaries between practitioners and parents in contexts characterised by mobility and limited access to formal educational structures. The governing bodies not only facilitate communication and shared decision-making but also help sustain parental involvement despite the unique challenges associated with mobile ECCE units. Therefore, the present study contributes new insights by illustrating the contextualised role of governing bodies in promoting parent participation within mobile ECCE environments.

Previous studies have emphasised the importance of structured parental engagement in enhancing collaboration between parents and educators. Cheng and Chen (2018) argue that parent meetings, workshops, and introductory sessions help establish trust and strengthen partnerships between families and educators. Similarly, Ugwuanyi et al. (2021) found that regular interactions provide opportunities to address urgent concerns, establish shared goals, and maintain consistent communication. Research further indicates that strategies such as involving parents in homework activities and organising regular meetings promote children's well-being, strengthen home-based learning, and encourage active parental participation (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Cheng & Chen, 2018). In addition, Sim et al. (2021) contend that targeted training and motivation can empower parents to become actively involved in their children's learning.

The findings of the present study corroborate these earlier studies but also provide context-specific insights within mobile ECCE settings. Participants reported that stakeholder meetings and parent engagements served as important platforms for communication, collaboration, and shared decision-making. Unlike the studies conducted in conventional ECCE environments, the current study demonstrates that these structured interactions are particularly important in mobile ECCE spaces, where opportunities for regular face-to-face engagement may be limited. The findings further reveal that such engagements not only strengthen relationships between practitioners and parents but also facilitate parents' active

involvement in supporting their children's learning despite the challenges associated with mobile contexts.

Previous research has highlighted the significance of home visits in promoting parental involvement in ECCE settings. Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) point out that home visits enhance parents' active participation by bridging communication gaps between practitioners and families. Similarly, Durisic and Bunijevac (2017) emphasise that home visits extend the educational environment into the home, enabling practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of children's family contexts. These studies suggest that observing family environments allows practitioners to provide more appropriate support to children while strengthening the relationship between the home and the ECCE setting.

The findings of the present study support these earlier findings while providing additional insights within the context of mobile ECCE settings. Participants reported that home visits served as an important strategy for strengthening communication and fostering partnerships between practitioners and parents. However, unlike previous studies conducted in more conventional ECCE contexts, the current study demonstrates that home visits in mobile ECCE units are particularly valuable for reaching families who may have limited access to formal educational services. The findings further reveal that home visits enable practitioners to understand the unique living circumstances of families, tailor their support to children's needs, and promote a supportive learning environment that connects home and ECCE experiences.

Earlier research highlights the importance of parents as central figures in children's development and learning. Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach posits that parents constitute the child's most immediate and influential developmental context (Tudge et al., 2022). Consequently, listening to parents and valuing their perspectives are considered essential for fostering positive developmental outcomes. Cheng and Chen (2018) further argue that regular communication and the inclusion of parents' views enhance the quality of daily interactions and promote a collaborative environment in which parental input is recognised and respected. These studies suggest that meaningful engagement with parents strengthens both children's development and partnerships between families and ECCE services.

The findings of the present study corroborate these perspectives while offering insights

specific to mobile ECCE settings. Participants emphasised the importance of listening to parents and maintaining open communication to support children's learning and well-being. However, unlike previous studies that largely examined traditional ECCE contexts, the current study demonstrates that valuing parents' perspectives is particularly important in mobile ECCE units, where practitioners often rely on parents' knowledge of their children and family circumstances. The findings further reveal that regular communication and responsiveness to parental concerns ensures trust, strengthen practitioner–parent relationships, and contribute to more collaborative approaches to supporting children's development within mobile ECCE units.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the study focused on a limited number of mobile ECCE units, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other contexts, particularly more stable or urban ECCE environments. Although rich qualitative data were collected, the small and context-specific sample limits the extent to which the findings can be used to evaluate other contexts. Secondly, the study relied primarily on practitioners' perspectives, thereby failing to capture parents' voices and experiences. This may have limited a more balanced understanding of parent participation, particularly from the viewpoint of families themselves. Thirdly, the mobile nature of the ECCE sites posed logistical constraints, which affected the duration and frequency of data collection engagements. As a result, some interactions may not have fully captured long-term patterns of parent participation.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could broaden the scope by including multiple stakeholder groups, particularly parents and governing body members, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of parent participation in ECCE contexts. Comparative studies between

mobile and stationary ECCE units would also be valuable in identifying how context influences parental engagement strategies. In addition, longitudinal research could be conducted to explore how parent participation evolves over time within mobile ECCE environments, particularly as relationships between practitioners and families deepen. Finally, future research could also examine the effectiveness of specific engagement strategies, such as home visits or governance structures in improving measurable child learning and developmental outcomes.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that parent participation in mobile ECCE settings is facilitated through a multilayered approach that encompasses governance structures, regular meetings, home visits, workshops, family motivators, participation in mobile unit activities, and active listening. While previous studies have emphasised the importance of these strategies in conventional ECCE contexts, the present study demonstrates how they operate within mobile ECCE environments, where practitioners and families often encounter unique challenges related to mobility, accessibility, and communication.

The findings further indicate that governing bodies serve as important intermediaries that promote collaboration and shared decision-making between practitioners and parents. Structured engagements, such as meetings and workshops, create opportunities for communication, relationship-building, and parental empowerment, while home visits enable practitioners to understand families' circumstances and provide contextually relevant support. In addition, listening to parents and valuing their perspectives strengthens trust and enhances collaborative partnerships that contribute to children's learning and well-being.

These findings highlight the importance of personalised, flexible, and inclusive approaches to parent participation in mobile ECCE settings. By adopting these strategies, ECCE practitioners can establish supportive networks that encourage meaningful parental involvement and strengthen connections between homes and ECCE services. Consequently, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating that strong relationships, open communication, and shared responsibility are essential for promoting

effective parent participation and supporting the holistic development of children within mobile ECCE contexts.

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