Transformative Leadership in the Sustainable Development of Early Childhood Education Teachers in South Africa: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper sought to provide an overview and arguments of prevailing South Africa's higher education initiatives, focusing on transformative leadership's influence on sustainable Early Childhood Development (ECD) teacher development emphasizing partnership, empowerment, and shared vision.

Design/methods/approach – This paper is grounded in a systematic review approach based on the selected keywords. 180 articles written in English and published between 2007 and 2024 in DHTE, Scopus, WoS, DOAJ, and Scielo SA databases were targeted as potential sources for this study. Systematic review guidelines were used to reduce them, focusing on topics, abstracts, and issues. The selected 80 articles were analysed independently for reliability and transferability. In addition, content analysis was used to construe the influence of transformational leadership on sustainable ECD teacher development within South Africa.

Findings – The findings reveal that the rationale for adopting transformative leadership in sustainable ECD teacher development in higher education is grounded in the culture of continuous learning and professional growth. This encourages reflection and self-assessment among teachers, helping them to evaluate their practices and adapt to meet students' needs better, which is crucial for sustainable development. In addition, this leadership style addresses social justice issues by advancing inclusive and equitable educational practices. It was acknowledged that this supports ECD teachers in developing their knowledge, skills and values. This enhances teachers' teaching practices thereby contributing to sustainable ECD educational outcomes.

Research implications/limitations – The review acknowledges the limitation of possible interpretive bias and recommends the need to explore further how transformative leadership can be adopted into the contemporary ECD curriculum.

Practical implications – This provides insights for policymakers, curriculum developers, and teachers with an emphasis on how transformative leadership can influence the quality of the ECD teacher development programme in South Africa.

Originality/value – This review contributes to the field by highlighting a largely overlooked transformative leadership style and suggesting how its influence can inform the creation of sustainable ECD teacher development.

Keywords Early childhood education teacher, Sustainable development, Transformative leadership

Paper type Literature review

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1. Introduction

Transformation issues in South Africa are multifaceted, with a mixture of political, social, economic, and environmental (Mbandlwa, Dorasamy & Fagbadebo, 2020; Venter, Du Plessis, & Stander, 2024). In the case of education, transformation can happen at multiple levels, such as individual classrooms, or even across entire educational institutions (Alzoraiki et al., 2024). It typically involves adopting new practices, policies and technologies better to meet the needs of students, teachers and communities (Sliwka et al., 2024). Thus, Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers, transformative leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the foundational learning experiences of young children. In this regard, educational institutions are seen as the conduits for facilitating young children to acquire relevant competencies (O'Keeffe et al., 2022; Shahid, 2024). This calls for educational institutions to treat this as a genuine 21st-century need to be taken on board efficiently to allow the teachers' participation in decision-making, open communication, critical thinking, and curriculum improvement through the use of technology and innovation (Al-Husseini et al., 2021). It is in this regard that this paper is of great significance due to the region's unique educational settings, which calls for the understanding of issues concerning educational quality, teacher support, and long-term development in ECD settings.

In this paper transformative leadership and transformational leadership are used as distinct concepts, though they share similarities in inspiring change. In this case transformational leadership focuses on motivating ECD teachers to achieve extraordinary outcomes by emphasizing vision, morale, and performance. Thus, it is centred on the leader-follower dynamic, aiming to elevate group interests and foster innovation. However, transformative leadership goes beyond ECD teacher relationships, addressing systemic and structural transformations to promote equity, justice, and profound in their professional development. Thus, transformative leadership challenges the ECD teachers' status quo with the view of creating sustainable professional development. In other words, it emphasizes broader professional impact that ECD teachers have in laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning for children's future endeavours (Tian & Guo, 2024). This can be catalysed by transformational leadership through fostering a sense of personal growth, empowerment and a shared vision for the future (Kasur et al., 2023).

The success of this transformation at early levels of education is largely dependent upon proactive teachers who choose progress instead of stagnation in terms of their personal and professional development. This can be supported by Target 4.2 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN's SDGs) calls for all girls and boys to have access to quality ECD that enables them to be ready for primary education by 2030 (Ally et al., 2022). Thus, transformative leadership is essential in Early Childhood Development (ECD) teacher development, contributing significantly to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4.2. Visionary leaders prioritize the professional growth of ECD teachers by advocating for comprehensive training programmes that focus on both technical skills and holistic approaches to child development. They empower teachers through mentorship, fostering a culture of continuous learning and collaboration.

Transformative leaders also promote innovative teaching strategies, encouraging educators to adopt inclusive and culturally relevant practices that address the diverse needs of children (Bush & Glover, 2016). Additionally, they work to influence policies that improve teacher remuneration, working conditions, and access to resources, ensuring sustainability in ECD programmes. By championing these efforts, transformative leaders equip ECD teachers with the tools and support needed to provide quality early education, ultimately benefiting the children they serve (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). South Africa has made significant strides in ECD through initiatives like the 2030 Strategy for ECD programmes, which ensures universal access to quality ECD services, particularly for vulnerable children (Matlala & Molokwane, 2024). This strategy includes integrated support in education, health, nutrition, and social protection. Another notable effort is the transfer of ECD oversight to the Department of Basic Education in 2022, streamlining resources and enhancing teacher training, infrastructure, and service delivery (Proudlock et al., 2024). These policies reflect a robust commitment to building a strong foundation for young learners.

This goal discourages the dichotomy between 'orthodox' and heterodox' practices, thereby creating a practical way of solving educational challenges. This places much emphasis on the need for institutional leadership to initiate, organise, motivate, and direct operations toward the accomplishment of the set goals (Ebrahim & Clasquin-Johnson, 2024). Hence, in recent times, Southern Africa has taken steps that have seen the introduction of free and taken steps to strengthen the foundation of basic education, such as introducing free and compulsory ECD in the first two years of schooling (Gofar & Dasuki, 2024). Within this context, the approach underscores South Africa's commitment to providing all children with a solid foundation for future educational achievement and social inclusion. This places much emphasis on the need for a unified approach to ECD, addressing not only education but also other issues like health, nutrition, and child protection (Miftahurrohmah et al., 2021).

It is in this regard that this paper acknowledges the relevance of professional growth, community engagement, and the integration of local knowledge systems ECD programmes. However, the evolving demands for ECD have created numerous challenges such as resource constraints and limited transformative leadership styles. Despite the need for more studies on transformational leadership styles in education, most of the research on leadership (Anwar, 2024; Catalano et al., 2024; Kooli, 2020; Leibowitz et al., 2015; Litz & Scott, 2017) tends to be centred on broad educational reforms or leadership styles (autocratic, transactional, etc.).

This has created a gap in how transformative leadership can be used strategically to prepare teachers effectively to facilitate ECD programmes sustainably within Southern African contexts. In addition, the existing discourse overlooks the relevance of cultural contexts and community-driven approaches in sustainable ECD teacher development (Singh, Bhagwan & Singh, 2024). In this context, we have noted that while there is growing recognition of the significance of transformative leadership in ECD across South Africa, a substantial gap exists in literature and practice regarding the specific ways in which it influences sustainable teacher development in the region. It is against this background that this paper sought insights into the identified gap guided by the following question: How does transformative leadership influence sustainable ECD teacher development in South Africa?

2. The conceptual framework underpinning the infusion of transformative leadership in sustainable ECD teacher development

This conceptual framework integrates principles from andragogy learning, transformative leadership, and sustainable learning theories. These theories work synergically to guide the process of fostering sustainable development in ECD teachers through visionary leadership, continuous professional growth, and a focus on long-term effects. Correspondingly, andragogy, transformative and sustainable development theories offer a strong basis for the realisation and interpretation of transformative leadership within the context of sustainable ECD teacher development. Figure 1 below shows the link between the selected theories.
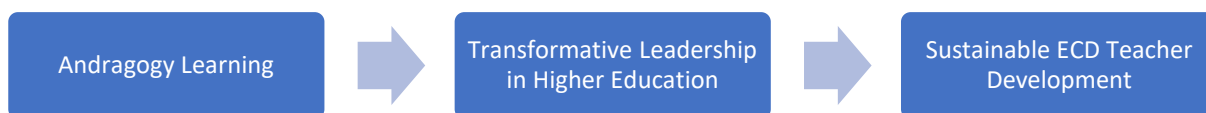

Figure 1. Interconnectedness of selected theories (Anderson, 2017; Berkovich, 2016; Brown, Brown & Nandekar, 2019)

The above framework shows the interconnectedness of these theories in sustainable ECD teacher development in South Africa (Alam, 2022). It shows the complexities of transformative leadership by exemplifying its capacity to instigate, empower and transform the ECD teacher development programme sustainably (Amini & Yari, 2022). In other words, the transformative leadership theory facilitates the acquisition of insights on critical elements (Shields, 2024), which contribute to improved performance by ECD teachers in their teaching and learning process. This

is augmented by the sustainable development theory which recognises the interconnectedness between the leadership style and the environment in decision-making (Shi et al., 2019).

The sustainable development theory was developed by the Brundtland Commission to shape and create a platform for scholars such as Ostrom, Meadows and the United Nations geared towards addressing complex challenges of balancing different facets of life (Borowy, 2013). So, sustainable development theory encourages viewing issues holistically rather than in isolation, aiming for long-term solutions in ECD teacher development. In other words, the sustainable development theory provides all-encompassing thoughts on long-term equitable outcomes for ECD teacher professional development (Redman & Larson, 2011). This intersects with the andragogy learning theory, which ensures that the ECD teacher development process respects adult learning principles, making it relevant (Diduck et al., 2012). This guides how ECD teachers engage with relevant knowledge, skills, and values in a bid to empower them meaningfully to enhance their professional growth. On the other hand, the transformational leadership theory connects the ideas from andragogy learning and sustainable development theories through its emphasis on the need to motivate and inspire ECDs to pursue continuous development (Tikly, 2019). Thus, it fosters the creation of an environment where adult learning principles are respected and sustainable practices are embedded in ECD teacher development programmes.

Figure 2. Interaction of transformational leadership aspects in sustainable ECD teacher development (Longwell-McKean, 2012)

The above interactions foster the formulation of a system where ECD teacher development is not only restricted to a series of isolated events; instead, it should be a continuous, reflective, and meaningful professional journey aligned with sustainable development goals (Burns, Diamond-Vaught & Bauman, 2015). This stems from the observation that key tenets of transformative leadership, including collegiality, mutual existence, and responsible handling of power are invaluable to the success of institutions (Pattison & Corser, 2023). This conceptual framework articulates an integrated approach, which considers professional growth, stewardship and inclusion to ensure that ECD teacher development is equitable and sustainable. Therefore, the approach creates an empowering and meaningful action towards more sustainable ECD teacher development.

3. Methods

In this paper, a systematic review approach was used to analysis(Clarke & Braun, 2021), the intersection between transformative leadership and sustainable ECD teacher development in Southern Africa meticulously. This approach was all-inclusive, as it allowed for a nuanced understanding of transformative leadership and its influence on sustainable ECD teacher development. This review process was structured in the following phases: (1) search for sources, (2) eligibility criteria, and (3) information sources, and data collection and analysis (Adeoye & Ainnubi, 2023). This structure was designated based on the supposition that it was to guarantee reproducibility of the whole process.

Firstly, the fundamental terms of this paper were identified: 'Early Childhood Development', OR 'ECD', OR 'early education', 'sustainable' OR 'sustainable teacher development', 'transformative leadership', OR 'transformative', It is significant to acknowledge that at this phase, synonyms were also considered. Thereafter, the eligibility criteria were applied to the sources that were predominantly written in English. The table shows the eligibility criteria that guided the inclusion or exclusion of a literature source in this paper.

Table 1. Literature sources eligibility criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Other languages
Publication period	From 2007-2024	Before 2007
Type of document	Peer-reviewed papers	Other formats
Research area	ECD Teacher Education	Other areas

In this review, we considered articles published from 2007 - 2024, the period after UNESCO's 2008 report 'The Contributions of Early Childhood Education to Sustainable Development'. Only peer-reviewed papers were considered for inclusion in this review since it emphasizes research quality (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020). The year 2007 was pivotal in South Africa's educational landscape due to significant policy reforms and shifts in leadership perspectives. This period marked a focus on improving the quality of education in disadvantaged schools, reflected in measures like the Education Laws Amendment Act of 2007, which targeted infrastructure improvement and underperforming school regulation (Christie, 2010). In educational leadership literature, 2007 saw a shift toward distributed and instructional leadership models, emphasizing collaboration, emotional intelligence, and the dynamics of power in leadership (Bush & Glover, 2016). These developments collectively aimed to address systemic inequalities and foster inclusive, high-quality education across the country. Lastly, we included articles from teacher education with specific reference to ECD. Thus, the exclusion criteria were in essence antonyms of the inclusion ones. Based on this, we selected sources from DHTE, Scopus, WoS, DOAJ, and Scielo SA databases, since these are documented for their thoroughness in research, mostly in the field of teacher education.
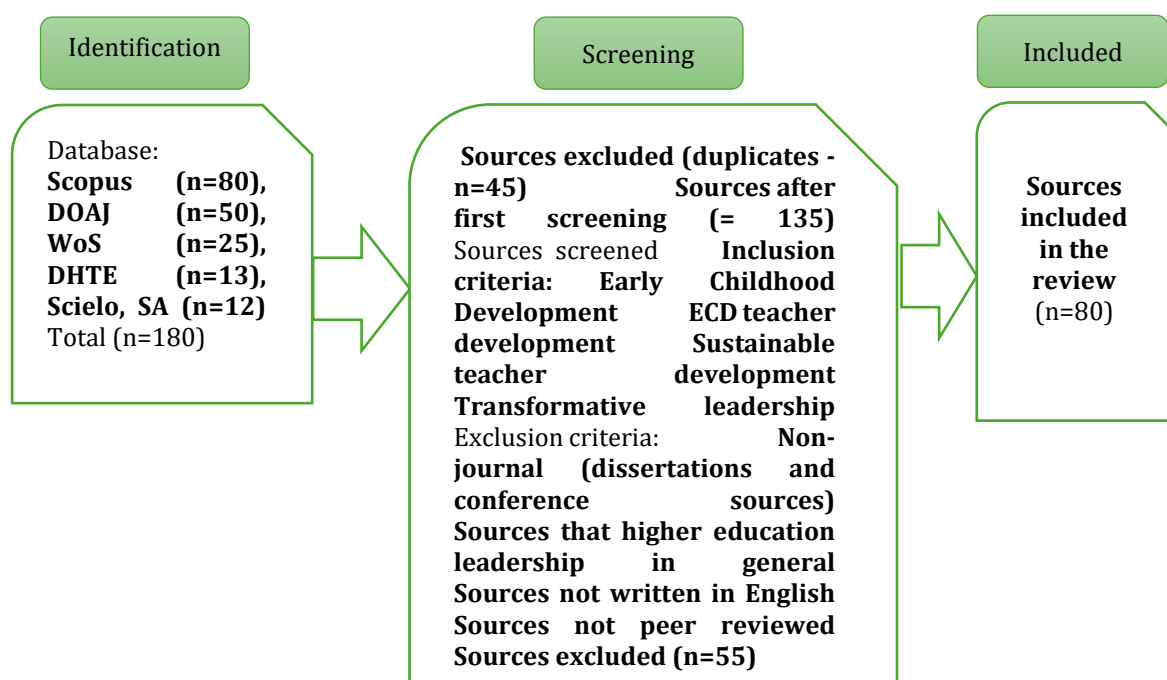

Figure 3. PRISMA flow diagram

The data identification and screening process is outlined in Figure 3. First, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined based on the research focus, this search stage produced a total of 180 articles obtained from Scopus (n = 80), DOAJ (n = 50), Web of Science (n = 25), DHTE (n = 13), and Scielo SA (n = 12). Thus, 180 articles were selected for their relevance to specific research themes, such as examining educational leadership or the impact of policies on ECD teacher development. To ensure reliability of data peer-reviewed status and publication credibility were considered. In addition, methodological rigor served as a filter. As a way of refining the selection process articles were categorized by themes ensure that these articles addressed diverse aspects of the issue at the centre of this paper. From these 180 articles, duplicates were eliminated leaving 145 articles. After the first screening, 54 sources such as conferences, theses, and dissertation were omitted, leaving 91 articles. A further 11 articles were excluded because they were not reported in English. The authors double-checked the full text of the 80 eligible articles to ascertain that they met the inclusion criteria This approach ensured that the selected articles were both justified and aligned with the paper's goal. In this case the PRISMA techniques provided a structured framework for documenting the process and enhancing replicability.

4. Result

This section sets the stage by providing enough context and clarity on the influence of transformative leadership on sustainable ECD teacher development so that the audience is primed to comprehend the more detailed presentation, and analysis as follows:

4.1. Understanding transformative leadership within the context of sustainable ECD teacher development

From the consulted literature sources, it was noted that in higher education, transformative leadership is based on the broad transformational movement that was initiated in the 1970s, partially as an answer to fluctuating and thought-provoking financial and scientific settings (Bush, 2007). It is characterised by the need for visionary leadership and a dependable stance on future development. In this case, the development of transformational leadership in ECD teacher professional development made a remarkable departure from the authoritarian approaches. This signifies a transformation towards more democratic and workable approaches in educational settings (Bush, 2020). This evolution is driven by a thoughtful need for the ECD teacher development programmes to negotiate the drawbacks in a highly dynamic globalised landscape.

From the above analogue, it can be understood that transformative leadership is an approach to creating a clear and compelling vision for professional development, where each ECD teacher undergoes quality development through ensuring growth. This fosters collaboration to co-create solutions and align resources with the long-term goals of ECD teacher development (Lakomski, Eacott & Evers, 2016). In addition, it is inclusive, focusing on the holistic professional development of ECD teachers grounded in sustainable practices to benefit the broader educational ecosystem (Junaedi, Suherman & Syarifudin, 2023). This revealed the need to recognise transformative leadership as a means of empowering ECD teachers by creating an environment for them to become autonomous and innovative in their teaching practices.

In addition, transformative leadership provides equitable opportunities for professional development. This ensures that ECD teachers have the much-needed knowledge, skills, and values to excel in the teaching and learning process (Atmore, 2012). Therefore, this creates the need to promote a culture of critical reflection in a bid to foster a mindset of dynamic lifelong learning among ECD teachers. This is accompanied by regular feedback loops along with opportunities for ECD teachers that ensure their development is responsive to real-time professional needs. In support, Ferguson and Roofe (2020) advanced the argument that transformative leadership in sustainable ECD teacher development poises the needs of teachers with the overarching goals of improving education quality and equity.

Hence, from this section, we can understand transformative leadership as the behaviour that can guide teacher development in a good direction, and inspire ECD teachers with innovation

and support, which results in their professional growth to the benefit of educational institutions. This is made possible based on the premise that through this approach everyone can lead and contribute mostly in transformative moments (Montuori & Donnelly, 2017). In this regard, transformative leadership within the context of sustainable professional development involves the active participation of ECD teachers in asking about the kind of teaching and learning environment they have to create through their opinions, actions, and connections (Kellerman, 2012).

In the broad sense, transformative leadership within the context of professional development provides a platform that embodies the highest ethical ideals that facilitate ECD teachers' creativity and interconnectedness in their professional environment (Gidley, 2010). This advances the development of cognitive, social, moral, and affective dimensions, which enable ECD teachers to recognise and reassess their thinking, feeling, and acting (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Therefore, we understand transformative leadership as an approach through which ECD teachers are transformed in terms of their values and self-concept (Caldwell et al., 2012). Thus, teachers as a product of a sustainable learning process should transform their ways of thinking and acting as they participate in the ECD curriculum development process (Boström et al., 2018).

In this, it's appreciated that sustainable ECD teacher development is an essential means for teachers to recognise the interconnection between different phases of the curriculum development process. However, sustainable ECD teacher development does not simply happen by itself; there is a need to develop an in-depth look at how transformative leadership can be adopted as a key driver for professional growth. From the above, it can be acknowledged that transformative leadership as the approach that facilitates ECD teachers' critical engagement with their beliefs, to know in light of their current experiences, with the view to acquire more (Walters, Charles & Bingham, 2017). It is against this background that the next section articulates the implications of integrating transformative leadership into sustainable ECD teacher development.

4.2. Practical implications of integrating transformative leadership into sustainable ECD teacher development

South Africa have reformed ECD policies to ensure the prioritisation of the sector (Wood & Neethling, 2024). The table below shows the typical contextual challenges still existing in Southern Africa. The challenges in Table 2 amplify the need to instil a transformative leadership mentality in sustainable ECD teacher development. This approach is considered crucial for addressing the evolving demands in the ECD teacher development landscape (Martin & Martin, 2024). It is against this background that this section centres on the interrogation of the practical implications of integrating transformative leadership into sustainable ECD teacher development in South Africa.

In Southern Africa, ECD faces several contextual challenges, which can impact the quality and accessibility of education for young children. For instance, there is often a shortage of trained ECD teachers, and those who are employed may not receive adequate professional development opportunities (Richter & Samuels, 2018). This can affect the quality of ECD instruction given by the teachers in teaching and learning activities. While there have been efforts to improve ECD through policies and programmes, implementation can be inconsistent and support may vary across South African countries (Makhubele & Baloyi, 2018). Hence, the need to tackle these challenges through sustainable ECD teacher development bolstered with transformative leadership. This creates diverse settings, contexts, and backgrounds that proffer an environment that favours inclusivity in training programmes. This progressive leadership approach offers opportunities to rethink and direct ECD to the point where it becomes possible to transform existing values, beliefs, and epistemologies (Hannaway, 2022). In other words, this approach creates a critical lens that reshapes the professional qualifications, and debates on policy changes on sustainable ECD teacher development (Hecht et al., 2023). Therefore, this calls for an increase in inclusive practice to mitigate the effects of diversity in ECD teacher development (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2022).

Table 2. Typical contextual ECD challenges existing in some of the South Africa

Challenges	Envisaged solutions	Sample literature source
Training of ECD teachers is fragmented (South Africa)	Review initial professional qualifications. Enforce institutional-level capacity development. Provide classroom learning and teaching materials that are contextually responsive.	Hannaway, 2022
Difficulty in regulating and controlling quality because the ECD sector is mostly privatised (South Africa) Failure to meet developmental outcomes appropriate for ages 3–5 (South Africa)	Use multi-sectoral and multi-systemic approaches. Enforce institutional-level capacity development. Professionalise sector. Provide norms and standards for teachers and structures for ongoing professional development.	Chola, G., & Banja, 2024; Wood, L. & Neethling, 2024
The challenges experienced by practitioners from under-resourced early childhood development centres in South Africa: A single site study	Utilize multicultural pedagogy. Use transformative learning approaches. Provide for distributed pedagogical leadership.	Heikka et al., 2021; Visser et al., 2021)
Challenges faced by educators in implementing ECD policies (South Africa)	Coordinated services for ECD policy implementation. Standardization of the ECD curriculum.	Tyilo, Luggya & Mdaka, 2017

In inclusive settings, ECD teacher development needs to have leadership as a shared responsibility and work inclusively with the stakeholders (Cavanagh et al., 2018; Requena et al., 2024). In this sense, ECD teacher development should be grounded in transformative leadership as a pedagogical praxis to create an effective learning environment (Palaiologou & Male, 2019). Thus, the construct of transformative leadership as pedagogical praxis locates ECD teacher development in contextualised situations or community ecology. Hence, transformative leadership creates one unified process for sustainable ECD teacher development. This transformative leadership approach entails a balanced interplay of knowledge, theory, practical wisdom, craftsmanship, and reflexivity in 'one unified process' in contextualised situations (Hewitt, Davis & Lashley, 2014).

Therefore, a development programme that has gone through transformation can empower ECD teachers to successfully create a safe and healthy environment that fosters equal treatment and collegiality (Mampane & Mampane, 2022). This is espoused by (Heikka et al., 2021), who highlight that transformative leadership entails an enactment of both formal and informal leadership approaches separately, but interdependently. Within the context of ECD teacher development; it delineates responsibilities for pedagogical leadership (Zulkifli, 2021). Therefore, transformative leadership in sustainable ECD teacher development includes critically examining the positive and negative uses of power in the teaching and learning process; hence, a need to develop ethical ECD teachers capable of transforming the teaching and learning environments. This calls for the ECD teacher development to place much emphasis on ongoing learning and professional growth. This translates into a scenario that provides ECD teachers with the tools, resources, and support necessary for continuous improvement (Zulu, Aina & Bipath, 2022).

This requires an authentic engagement of ECD teachers who in turn can impress upon other stakeholders the need to cultivate and maintain a positive, and supportive learning environment (Zulkifli, Dewi & Corry, 2024). In this case, ECD teacher development grounded in transformative leadership genuinely values and gives meaning issue to sustainable ECD teacher development under the auspice of astute institutional governance networks. In other words, this creates professional learning communities among ECD teachers to facilitate mutual support, exchange ideas and address encountered challenges. In addition, transformative leadership helps ECD

teachers to be resilient and adaptive, encouraging them to find innovative solutions on how best to improve the quality of instruction. This could mean advocating better training, leading to systematic transformation in leadership in the context of the ECD teacher development landscape through effective collaboration between the key stakeholders.

5. Discussion

This discussion is grounded in a framework that integrates principles from adult learning, and transformative and sustainable theories. This framework supports a process of ECD teacher development rooted in lifelong learning and committed to sustainable practices. In other words, it facilitates convergence, which creates an environment where ECD teachers are uninterruptedly reinforced, permitted, and enthused to grow, guaranteeing sustainable and effective professional development. Combining adult learning values with transformative visionary and principled features of leadership grounded in sustainable ECD teacher development can generate a robust model for nurturing transformation, which is both impactful and enduring.

In this regard, transformational leadership is attuned to the changing nature of professional development, thereby exposing ECD teachers to what is happening in teaching and learning practices. Thus, its scope should be holistic and integrate essential pedagogical approaches into ECD teacher development. Within the context of ECD teacher development, transformative leadership can play a crucial role in achieving long-term, sustainable improvement in the quality of instruction in teaching and learning activities. Hence, this section articulates our understanding of transformative leadership within the context of sustainable ECD teacher development.

From the analysis, it can be understood transformative leadership as the continuous, long-term improvement of ECD teachers' knowledge, skills, and values underpinned by the principles of sustainability in education. In this case, it promotes advocates for ECD teacher development in a contextually and culturally responsive environment (Ndebele et al., 2024). It ensures the integration of professional development practices, creating pathways for lifelong and embedding reflective practices, which allow ECD teachers to adapt to the ever-changing educational landscapes (Shields, 2012). This is made possible through the formulation of policies that offer systematic support with the view to ensure that ECD teachers have ongoing access to professional development opportunities (Bush, 2008; Chikuvadze, Zuva & Mugijima, 2024). Therefore, integrating transformative leadership in ECD teacher development can be regarded as a contagious act.

This stimulates transformative leadership that inspires and motivates ECD teachers, thereby fostering a sense of purpose and commitment to their professional development (Palaiologou & Male, 2019). In this regard, transformative leadership creates an environment where ECD teachers feel valued, supported, and empowered. This enhances ECD teacher motivation and encourages continuous professional growth, which leads to quality outcomes. All this can be made possible through the integration of transformative leadership into ECD teacher development that encourages them to take an active role, accountable and responsible in all phases of the curriculum development process. By adopting a transformative leadership approach, higher education institutions can create robust systems for training, ensuring that ECD teachers are equipped with the latest pedagogical knowledge and skills (Syadzili, 2019). This encourages reflection and self-assessment among teachers, helping them to evaluate their practices and adapt to meet students' needs better, which is crucial for sustainable development.

Building collaborative and inclusive culture-transformative leadership prioritizes collaboration, open communication, and collective problem-solving (Omdal & Roland, 2020). This is particularly imperative in higher education, where the ECD teacher programme can benefit from a more interdisciplinary and cooperative approach. By fostering a collaborative culture, transformative leadership ensures that teachers do not work in isolation, but are part of a community that shares best practices, solves challenges, and supports one another's development (Ebrahim & Clasquin-Johnson, 2024). Transformative leadership goes beyond merely managing change; it focuses on inspiring and empowering teachers to embrace continuous personal and professional growth. Within the context of South Africa, where challenges such as resource

scarcity, inequity, and diverse cultural needs prevail, transformative leadership helps to create a dynamic, responsive, and inclusive ECD environment. Furthermore, this leadership style facilitates the development of local solutions, ensuring that ECD teacher development remains sustainable, context-specific, and aligned with the evolving needs of both the teachers and students. Ultimately, transformative leadership lays the foundation for a more equitable and high-quality ECD system by fostering a collective vision of growth, empowerment, and innovation.

5. 1. Research contribution

This paper makes a significant contribution to teacher development paradigms, particularly regarding sustainable ECD teacher development. By exploring how transformative leadership can foster continuous growth and empowerment for ECD teachers, the paper enhances the understanding of how sustainable ECD teacher development can contribute to long-term improvements in the quality of instruction.

5. 2. Limitations

Despite the valuable insights provided, limitations should be acknowledged in this paper. There is a possibility of researchers' bias about their personal views or preconceptions. These can involuntarily influence the outcome since the researchers play a substantial role in data discussion. In addition, researchers can inadvertently look for evidence that supports their anticipated outcome, potentially overlooking opposing evidence.

5. 3. Suggestions

The implications of this paper suggest that transformative leadership can significantly influence ECD teacher development by fostering a culture of continuous growth, shared responsibility, and innovation. Thus, sustainable ECD teacher development is not only concerned about improving short-term skills, instead, it ensures the teachers are equipped to adapt to future challenges and grow professionally. This contributes to a long-lasting impact on ECD teachers' holistic professional development.

6. Conclusion

Transformative leadership injects a new perspective into sustainable ECD teacher development by stressing the need for continuous personal and professional growth, cooperation, inspiration, and adaptation. This fosters long-term improvements in both teaching quality and educational outcomes. Therefore, transformative leadership ensures that ECD teacher development remains sustainable, context-specific, and aligned with the evolving needs of both the teachers and students. It is in this context that this paper recommends that Southern Africa should prioritize continuous professional development for ECD teachers by implementing tailored training programs that focus on inclusive education, digital literacy, and innovative teaching methods. Additionally, the government can expand the curriculum to include vocational and community-driven content, ensuring that it addresses local challenges while preparing learners for diverse career paths. Strengthening policies to guarantee equitable resource distribution and improving infrastructure in underprivileged schools will also be essential to create a more inclusive and effective education system.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Pinias Chikuvadze conceived the idea. Claretah Makuvire conducted data collection. Christopher Mutseekwa developed the theory of leadership, early childhood, sustainable early childhood development, and teacher development. Joseph Zuva performed the analysis. All authors engaged in discussions regarding the findings and made contributions to the final manuscript.

Data availability statement

The dataset generated and analyzed during the research is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interests statement

All authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could influence the work presented in this manuscript.

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